RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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2025 Abstracts

Artificial Intelligence

HEARTH-led AI Integration: Balancing Efficiency and Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Human-Centric Leadership

Emaneli Barresi
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Rapid artificial intelligence (AI) adoption across industries brings both unprecedented opportunity and intensifying tension between efficiency and human flourishing. This article explored the HEARTH (Human-Ethics Approach for Remote & Tech-Hybrid) Team Leadership Model as a Christ-centered, human-centric framework for guiding ethical AI integration in organizational contexts. Drawing on literature in values-based purpose, human–machine dynamics, algorithmic risk, human-centric leadership, and Christian business ethics, the HEARTH model bridges the gap between technological advancement and biblical principles of justice, compassion, stewardship, and human dignity. A case study from HEARTH implementations highlights measurable relational and cultural outcomes aligned with flourishing. Implications for ethical leadership, AI governance, and future research validation are provided.

Keywords: AI ethics, human-centric leadership, HEARTH model, flourishing, Christian leadership

Understanding Resistance to Organizational AI Adoption

Dominic Frank
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-method case study was to understand why employees within an organization are hesitant to adopt large language models, demonstrate that quantitative scales can be used imperfectly to identify issues, and artificial intelligence (AI) can quickly help leaders understand these results and their associated risks and biases. When utilized ethically, AI can enhance organizational efficiency and support human flourishing (Spitko, 2024; Stahl et al., 2021). The two most common ways AI is employed within an organization are automating routine tasks and augmenting decision making (Bankins et al., 2024; Kulat & Pais, 2024). However, the introduction of AI within an organization often encounters stiff resistance (McCall, 2025; Weber et al., 2023). Therefore, this study used Armenakis et al.'s (2007) Organizational Change Recipients' Belief Scale (OCRBS) to assess employees' belief structures underlying their resistance and to identify the primary driver quickly. The OCRBS was administered to the organization's six-person administrative department and measured five dimensions: discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support, and valence. After the primary resistance driver of the discrepancy was identified, focused qualitative data were collected to confirm and better understand this finding. AI was also used to augment decision making by gaining a deeper understanding of any risks, biases, and ambiguous scale results. The results of this study contribute to existing theory by demonstrating the applicability of the OCRBS to understand resistance to AI; imperfectly applying scales to help identify change resistance; and the use of AI by practitioners and academics to augment decision making and explore challenges and issues.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, leadership, change management

Faithful Stewardship in the Age of AI: Christian Approaches to Governance in Higher Education

Elizabeth G. Beech
Avondale University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Currently, much research on AI governance focuses on frameworks for regulating AI technologies, particularly regarding student use and ensuring academic integrity and quality. However, this article explores how higher education institutions, particularly those shaped by and committed to a Christian worldview, can approach AI not merely as a subject of regulation but as a potential tool for enacting faithful stewardship and mission-aligned governance. Drawing on recent global research and current practices, this article examines the uptake of generative AI technologies in higher education

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governance. Special attention is given to relevant theological principles that inform their ethical implementation. Studies indicate that general mandates such as transparent communication, participatory policy development, and adaptive oversight are commonly used strategies for governance and risk management. Adopting a phenomenological perspective and incorporating examples from Christian higher education leaders in Australia, this article considers how Christian institutions can lead not only in critiquing AI's risks but in modeling responsible, value-driven integration into governance practices. The discussion highlights the potential for AI to assist with tasks such as policy drafting, compliance monitoring, and board or committee support, provided its use is guided by theological commitments to wisdom, human dignity, and relational accountability. Ultimately, this article argues that Christian institutions have both an opportunity and a responsibility to shape AI integration through a biblical lens of wise, relational stewardship. These theological commitments form the basis of a proposed framework for evaluating and piloting AI tools in Christian university governance.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, governance, higher education, Christian stewardship, generative AI

Evaluating AI Translation for Global Entrepreneurship Education: A Stakeholder Flourishing Approach

Autonnette McLaughlin, John Mulford, and Jason Benedict
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Organizations implementing artificial intelligence (AI) for educational expansion face competing priorities between technical optimization and stakeholder impact. We examined how the principles outlined in John 10:10 inform AI implementation decisions aimed at fostering stakeholder flourishing. John 10:10's principle of an abundant life provides practical decision criteria: Does this technology benefit stakeholders or promote institutional efficiency? We examined AI translation evaluation for a global entrepreneurship education platform that is expanding beyond English-speaking markets. The analysis included professional consultations, manual testing, and evaluation across three solution categories: professional translation services, DIY/manual translation solutions, and browser extension solutions. The analysis built on a literature review of AI implementations, as documented in Harvard Business Review and MIT studies, to inform the stakeholder-centered approach. The analysis compared stakeholder-focused criteria with technical optimization approaches, identifying where principles of abundant life influence accessibility choices over

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automation and efficiency. Results demonstrate associations between the principles of abundant life and stakeholder flourishing through expanded access (Mayer et al., 2025), resource preservation, and multistakeholder consideration. The abundant life approach led to recommending immediate student-controlled translation access instead of waiting to implement institutional automation solutions. The chosen strategic option enables validating student demand before making a resource investment. This research presents a methodology for integrating biblical principles into AI implementation, offering insights into humanistic technology stewardship.

Keywords: artificial intelligence (AI), stakeholder flourishing, native artificial tongue

Biblical Perspectives

Nehemiah as a Trauma-Informed Servant Leader

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Biblical Perspectives

Abstract

Collective crises leave deep emotional, relational, and spiritual wounds within communities, requiring leaders who can respond with humility, courage, and discernment. This article examines Nehemiah as a trauma-informed servant leader whose actions foster human flourishing in the aftermath of collective trauma. Through a hybrid approach that integrates biblical exegesis, servant leadership scholarship, and a trauma-informed leadership framework, this paper argues that Nehemiah embodies core principles of trauma-informed leadership long before the development of modern psychological language. Using the five domains of safety, physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural, the analysis demonstrates how Nehemiah simultaneously restored structures, relationships, identity, and worship. His leadership reflects a holistic vision of flourishing (*shalom*) grounded in Scripture and fulfilled in Christ. This study contributes to faith-integrated leadership scholarship by offering a restorative and Christ-centered paradigm for leaders navigating wounded, fragmented, or crisis-shaped communities today.

Keywords: trauma, servant leadership, shalom, Nehemiah, flourishing

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Transforming Through Service: The Leadership of Christ Beyond the Well

Tara A. Birkett-Bramble
Regent University
Roundtable: Biblical Perspectives

Abstract

This study performs an ideological analysis of John 4:4–42, examining Christ's discourses with the Samaritan woman and her community. We argue that John's narrative transcends a simple message of love, presenting a strategic blueprint for church growth and communal restoration. The analysis centers on key interpretive elements, including location, followers, and discourse, to demonstrate how Christ's actions exemplify a fusion of transformational and servant leadership. By modeling a complete engagement template, Christ attracts followers and cultivates a desire for his presence. The pericope conveys a timeless message about the value of servant leadership across diverse organizational contexts and cultures. Ultimately, while transformational leadership can foster vision, influence behavior, and build community, the text posits that only the servant leader, as embodied by Christ, possesses the capacity for genuine human restoration. This creative and innovative approach to leadership, specifically Christ's tailored conversation with the Samaritan woman, produced a transformative encounter that led her to declare, "Come, see a man" (*New International Version*, n.d., John 4:28), thus initiating the evangelization of her community.

Keywords: transformational leadership, servant-leadership, community, innovation

Business and Society

Overcoming Barriers to Christ-Centered SMEs: Fostering Human Flourishing Through Faith-Driven Practices

Joseph C. Uwagaba
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) anchor the U.S. economy, comprising 99% of businesses, contributing 43.5% of GDP, and employing 45.9% of the private-sector workforce, adding 1.2 million net jobs in 2024 (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2025). Christ-centered SMEs, rooted in stewardship (Genesis 1:28) and justice

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(Micah 6:8), embody business as a divine calling to care for resources, stakeholder equity, and human flourishing—encompassing spiritual, social, and material well-being (Van Duzer, 2010; Volf, 1991). Despite this potential, barriers persist: 60% of SME owners lack ethical leadership training, a $5.7 trillion global finance gap hinders ethical investments, and 65% report that market pressures prioritize profit over purpose (U.S. SBA, 2025; World Bank, 2025). This study explored strategies for overcoming these challenges through a simplified approach, utilizing qualitative case studies of four faith-based SMEs (e.g., Hobby Lobby, Chick-fil-A, Everence Financial, and Thistle Farms), quantitative analysis of U.S. SBA and World Bank data, and the theological integration of biblical principles. Findings reveal that faith-driven practices foster "hybrid economies" that blend efficiency and grace (Elder-Vass, 2020), yielding 15% higher employee satisfaction, 10%–50% retention gains, and resilience amid ethical cost pressures. Recommendations include faith-based mentorship networks, ethical financing incentives, a stewardship cycle framework, and digital platforms to strengthen SME resilience. Synthesizing theology, ethics, and economics, this work charts pathways for Christ-centered SMEs to advance human flourishing and align economic practices with kingdom values.

Keywords: Christ-centered SMEs, Christian business ethics, human flourishing, stewardship, justice

The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Decision Making: An Economic and Christian Perspective

Karen Gayle
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

In today's digital age, social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok influence consumer behavior. They do this through social proof, influencer marketing, targeted advertising, and data analytics. This article examined the economic impact of these platforms on consumer decision-making. It also integrated a Christian perspective by exploring biblical teachings on stewardship, materialism, generosity, solidarity, and simplicity. The article provides a framework for responsible and ethical consumption. It offers insights into how social media and consumer behavior interact.

Keywords: social media, consumer decision making, economic impact, influencer marketing, social proof, data analytics, Christian ethics, stewardship

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Flourishing and Consumption: A Christian Perspective on Our Choices

Pierre Armel Kono Minkoulou
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

This article researches and analyzes the complex and multifactorial impact of the highly subjective, modern pursuit of human flourishing on consumer choice within the United States market. It offers a rigorous, academic examination through a Christian economic lens. The article details how the many expressions and definitions of flourishing—as optimal human well-being in physical, mental, social, spiritual, and other dimensions—influence U.S. consumer product and service choices. These choices span health and beauty, food and drink, physical and mental fitness, recreation, and personal development. Examples include everything from organic food to meditation apps and life coaching. This article draws on seminal research into the theories and behaviors that influence today's consumers. It examines how people's desires and needs for self-actualization affect purchasing patterns, and how markets have evolved to meet these needs. In this analysis, the authors introduce a practical analytical framework. This framework enables Christian consumers to question, reflect on, and better understand the complex psychology behind their self-actualization-related purchases. This allows them to make choices that are more informed and conscious, and better aligned with their values, in an increasingly vast and important market. Naturally, these choices will also reflect a Christian ethic of responsible resource stewardship, love, and responsibility to one's neighbor. As the Apostle Paul writes, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful, but not all things build up" (New International Version, 1978/2001 1 Corinthians 10:23).

Keywords: flourishing, consumer choice, Christian ethics, behavioral economics, wellness market.

Opportunity Cost and Crowding Out the Food Supply

Jon M. Wallace
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

This article examines the utilization of farmland and inquires whether we are making the most informed choices regarding its use. It focuses on opportunity cost, which

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means that using land for one purpose—such as fuel or alcohol—means we cannot use it for another—such as growing food. Right now, vast amounts of land are used to grow crops for ethanol (a fuel additive), alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, even though many people around the world do not have enough to eat. To carry out this study, I gathered data on the agricultural inputs required to produce one gallon of various alcohols and ethanol blends. This involved consulting recipe information, distilling guides, and technical production sources to determine the average number of pounds or bushels of crops, such as potatoes, corn, grapes, and barley, needed to convert into finished products. By establishing these input ratios, I created a baseline for estimating the land requirements for different categories of alcohol and fuel production. I then collected information on recent production volumes in both the United States and globally, drawing from agricultural reports, industry statistics, and government data. Using these figures, I calculated the acreage necessary to cultivate sufficient crops to meet current demand for vodka, whiskey, wine, beer, and ethanol. This methodology allowed me to translate production volumes into land-use estimates, highlighting the scale of farmland devoted to nonfood outputs. By combining input requirements with production statistics, the analysis provides a clear picture of the opportunity costs involved in allocating agricultural land to alcohol and fuel rather than food.

Keywords: crowding out, opportunity cost, food supply, ethanol, alcohol, agroeconomics

The Digital Temptation: How Social Media Hijacks Our Purchasing Decisions and What Faith Teaches Us About Wise Consumption

Isabella Piña
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behavior, creating new psychological triggers that drive impulsive buying decisions. This article examines how social media utilizes sophisticated algorithms, social proof mechanisms, and emotional manipulation tactics to influence consumer decision-making. Drawing on consumer choice theory, neuroscience research, and biblical scholarship, this analysis synthesizes findings from over 20 peer-reviewed sources to examine the phenomenon of "digital impulse buying" and its underlying psychological factors, including social proof amplification, emotional hijacking, and cognitive load reduction. Furthermore, this analysis integrates a Christian worldview perspective on stewardship and ethical consumption, offering practical guidance for consumers seeking to make more intentional purchasing decisions. Case studies of faith-integrated businesses, including federal contracting firm Inspired Solutions, Inc.,

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demonstrate how biblical principles can guide marketplace success. The article concludes with ethical, actionable strategies for consumers and businesses to navigate the digital marketplace and social media platforms responsibly.

Keywords: Christian stewardship, consumer choice theory, social media marketing, consumer behavior, impulse buying

Followership

When Nonprofits Flounder: Practical Strategies for Cultivating Board Engagement and Courageous Followership

Jennifer Brogee and Tamara Leonard
Indiana Wesleyan University
Roundtable: Followership

Abstract

Grassroots nonprofits play a critical role in addressing community needs, often emerging from the passion and commitment of a founder who identified gaps in local services. As these organizations mature and the founder's involvement declines, a sustainable leadership model with engaged staff and board members becomes essential to continue their mission. Despite increased attention on nonprofit sustainability, the practical integration of followership theory into board engagement remains underexplored. Drawing from our dual perspectives as nonprofit scholars and practitioners, this synthesis demonstrates that nonprofit organizations can take practical steps to encourage courageous followership behaviors among leaders, board members, and staff. By fostering an environment that celebrates the courage to assume responsibility, serve, challenge, participate in transformation, and take moral action (Chaleff, 2009), nonprofits benefit from increased mission focus and long-term sustainability. Through both academic inquiry and applied professional experience, this study bridges theory and practice to produce fifteen practical recommendations in board member selection, board training, board structure, and director and board president behaviors. These actionable strategies provide evidence-based guidance for leaders and boards seeking to cultivate courageous followership practices that advance organizational purpose and community impact.

Keywords: courageous followership, nonprofit governance, board engagement, founder's syndrome, organizational sustainability

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Foresight

From Foresight to Prototype: Executive Coaching for Personal Foresight, Self-Leadership, and Human Flourishing in 21st Century Healthcare

Rodney B. Woods
Founder, Envision Strategies LLC
Roundtable: Foresight

Abstract

Healthcare executives increasingly report feeling unprepared for emerging technology challenges despite elite education and extensive experience. Many lament that traditional executive programs never taught them to think about technologies that do not yet exist. This research presents a theoretical framework for developing personal foresight in healthcare leaders by integrating Christian theology, strategic foresight methods, and science fiction narratives. The proposed from foresight to prototype (FFP) framework comprises four developmental stages: strategic discernment (establishing spiritual and vocational foundations), imaginative exploration (utilizing speculative fiction to expand cognitive boundaries), covenantal alignment (ensuring ethical coherence), and prototype development (translating insights into organizational experiments). The framework addresses critical gaps in current leadership development by integrating typically separated domains—spiritual wisdom with strategic planning, imaginative exploration with practical application. Drawing on 21 years of experience in healthcare technology and doctoral research in strategic foresight, this study demonstrates how science fiction narratives can serve as ethical laboratories for exploring technological implications before they materialize. The theological component provides a moral grounding that is often absent in secular leadership development. The framework offers a structured approach for healthcare organizations seeking to prepare leaders for discontinuous change. Healthcare transformation requires leaders who can navigate the intersection between technological possibilities and human values. This research provides both a theoretical foundation and a practical methodology for developing such capabilities.

Keywords: executive coaching, personal foresight, science fiction prototyping, futures thinking, ethical laboratories

Human Resource Development

Boundaries as Christ-Centered Leadership Practice for Human Flourishing

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Lydia A. Pert
Regent University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

This article examined the critical role of boundaries as a Christ-centered leadership practice for human flourishing and the severe consequences of failing to maintain boundaries. Drawing from research on toxic leadership, human resource development, and organizational boundary setting, it highlights how missing or blurred boundaries lead to dysfunction that stalls employee development, resulting in organizational failure. The case study of Tessa (a pseudonym), an entry-level marketer who left her role under a boundless, overreaching CEO, illustrates how boundary failures can spiral out of control and harm everyone involved. On the other hand, boundary-driven organizations show that clear role definitions and structured oversight are foundational to success. This paper focuses on the costs of boundary neglect: cultures of fear, wasted talent, and failure thrive. Grounded in biblical principles such as Proverbs 25:28, this paper equips leaders to recognize the red flags of boundary erosion and understand the necessity of boundary-based leadership practices so that people and organizations can flourish.

Keywords: boundaries, human resource development, flourishing, toxic leadership

Toxic Leadership Impacts on Group Behavior and Organizational Culture

Curtis Mullin
Regent University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

This pilot study investigated the impact of toxic leadership behaviors on employee engagement and team performance—two key concerns for human resources professionals responsible for fostering a healthy organizational culture. Utilizing Schmidt's (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the study examined five dimensions of toxic leadership: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Data were collected from five employees within a small business, all reporting to the same supervisor, offering a concentrated view of leadership impact within a single team structure. Both instruments demonstrated high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .96. Although Pearson correlation results

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showed a moderate, nonsignificant positive relationship between toxic leadership and engagement, regression analysis revealed that traits such as unpredictability and authoritarianism hurt engagement levels. Interestingly, some aspects of narcissism and self-promotion correlated positively with engagement, suggesting that under certain conditions, these traits may be perceived as charismatic or motivational. While limited by sample size, the findings highlight the measurable effects that toxic leadership can have on team dynamics and employee morale. For human resources leaders, this underscores the importance of identifying toxic leadership patterns early and developing targeted interventions. Future research with broader samples is recommended to further validate these results and inform leadership development strategies, performance management, and organizational culture initiatives.

Keywords: toxic leadership, employee engagement, human resources management, organizational behavior, team performance, pilot study

Organizational Learning as Healing: Cultivating Safety and Growth After Trauma

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

Trauma impacts every sector of the modern workforce, shaping how individuals engage, learn, and contribute within organizations. Traditional models of organizational learning emphasize knowledge transfer but often neglect healing, safety, and restoration. This paper argues that trauma-informed leadership (TIL), when integrated with human resource development (HRD) theory and a Christ-centered worldview, can transform organizational learning into a pathway for human flourishing. Drawing on Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, the study highlights three leadership behaviors—regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—and applies them within HRD contexts. Five dimensions of organizational safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—are presented as prerequisites for effective learning. Case illustrations from nonprofit and military contexts demonstrate practical applications. The paper concludes with recommendations for HRD professionals, including reflective storytelling, pacing learning for deeper processing, and cultivating safe learning environments that affirm dignity and purpose.

Keywords: trauma, learning, healing, leadership, organization

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Heart Formation: Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Leadership

Alina Wreczycki and Chad Newton
Bethel University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

Grounded in Issler's (2012) Christian character formation and Wreczycki's (2021) sustainable social value models, this research qualitatively analyzed six participants' responses to explore the perception of flourishing from the standpoint of the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of the human condition as a step toward the working definition of flourishing within the context of Christ-centered leadership. Four males and two females from three states participated representing the second through the fifth decades of life. Four participants identified as being affiliated with a Christian denomination and two served as unaffiliated to juxtapose the views. Based on three research questions inquiring about the agreement or disagreement with Issler's model and the role of self-awareness and emotional maturity and sovereignty to follow it, the perception of flourishing was probed and its operationalization within organizational contexts. Referencing the selected verses from the Scripture analyzed exegetically through Robbins' (1996) inner texture, Issler's model was applied to Christ to serve as a benchmark to compare perceptions of flourishing and their practical application within organizational contexts. Saldana (2009) in vivo coding method and Liamputtong and Ezzy's (2005) qualitative analysis method were used to derive themes and codes for interpretation to answer the research questions.

Keywords: Christian character formation, Christ-centered leadership, flourishing

Organizational Leadership

Nurturing Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Leadership: A Biblical Case Study of Organizational Commitment and Support in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12

Matt Hattabaugh
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study examines the servant leadership model of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 as a biblical framework for human flourishing in organizational contexts. Writing to a young and persecuted church, Paul presents a leadership

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philosophy defined by moral integrity, relational presence, and sacrificial investment. Using a socio-rhetorical exegetical approach, this paper analyzes the inner, intertextual, and cultural textures of the passage to show how Paul's covenantal leadership subverts Greco-Roman honor norms and exemplifies Christ-centered authority. His refusal to manipulate, his nurturing metaphors, and his willingness to share his life with the community cultivate conditions that mirror contemporary constructs such as perceived organizational support (POS), affective organizational commitment, and person-organization fit (P-O fit). By integrating Pauline exegesis with organizational leadership theory, this study argues that biblical servant leadership fosters trust, belonging, and missional resilience, particularly within cross-cultural and faith-based organizations. While findings indicate that Pauline leadership is both theologically grounded and organizationally practical, further empirical research is necessary to assess its measurable impact across diverse ministry settings. Accordingly, this study raises the following question: How do biblically grounded servant leadership models, such as Paul's in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, influence POS and employee flourishing in cross-cultural, faith-based organizations?

Keywords: servant leadership, organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, person-organization fit, human flourishing

Value-Creating Organizational Leadership Theory: A Collaborative Initiative for Human Resource Management Retention

Gladys M. Monroe Nelson
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Organizational leadership principles applied in the hiring process through human resource management (HRM) by human resource professionals (HRP) in a hierarchical education system suggest the identification of behavioral leadership attributes (BLA). These applied principles identified in potential candidates, taught through mentorship, are an integral component of the learning process due to their implied transference of BLA from teacher to student within the mentorship context (e.g., implicit leadership theory) (Bellido-Garcia et al., 2022; Kelley & Wenzel, 2019; Monroe, 2025; Parrish, 2024; Rinaldi, 2020). For the student to flourish within the educational process and demonstrate BLA as a qualified candidate for employment, becoming trained and motivated to contribute to organizational citizenry, the organization's leadership and workplace environment must be conducive to employing value-creating organizational leadership theory (VCOLT) concepts. These concepts integrate BLA (e.g., elements), transformational leadership theory (TLT), charismatic leadership theory (CLT) and

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strategic management theory (SMT) as a collaborative leadership model (CLM) that promotes a moral structure for organizational psychological empowerment at all levels of the organization's hierarchical citizenry (Fry et al., 2005; Ishaq et al., 2023; Kollenscher et al., 2018). A qualitative exploratory, descriptive single case study and quantitative linear regression and t-test analysis studies demonstrated the importance of "person-job fit (PJF), person-organization fit (POF), and organizational commitment (OC)" crucial to employee retention (Parrish, 2024; Tufail & Jehahgir, 2018, pp. 311, 319; Yin, 2018).

Keywords: job-satisfaction, person-job fit, person-organization fit, strategic, retention

Regulating Distress Through the Five Domains of Safety: A Trauma-Informed Model for Modern Leadership

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Trauma is no longer viewed solely as an individual clinical problem; it is increasingly recognized as an organizational reality that shapes behavior, engagement, and performance in the workplace. Employees bring adverse childhood experiences, combat trauma, chronic stress, discrimination, and workplace harm into their professional roles, influencing attention, memory, emotional regulation, and trust. Trauma-informed leadership (TIL) provides a framework for addressing these realities by prioritizing human well-being as a strategic leadership goal (Lloyd, 2024). Within the TIL Impact Framework™, *regulating distress* emerges as a core leadership behavior that enables individuals and teams to function within an optimal "window of tolerance" for stress. This behavior is operationalized through five interdependent domains of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural. This article synthesizes trauma theory, neuroscience, organizational psychology, and leadership studies to articulate why regulating distress is indispensable for modern leadership and how the five domains of safety serve as practical mechanisms for achieving this goal. The paper explores the neurobiological underpinnings of distress, defines each domain of safety, and illustrates their relevance across organizational contexts. It argues that these domains are not peripheral "nice-to-have" concepts but essential leadership capacities that determine whether people can think clearly, build trust, learn, innovate, and flourish in the face of volatility and ongoing stressors. Implications for leadership development and organizational policy are discussed, positioning regulating distress through the five domains of safety as both an ethical mandate and a strategic imperative for sustainable, human-centered leadership.

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Keywords: trauma, safety, regulating distress, leadership, organization

The Role of Organizational Culture and Pastoral Leadership in Sustainable Church Outreach: A Multisite Mini-Ethnographic Case Study

Althea P. Gordon-Scott
Southeastern University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study examined the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in two churches that have sustainable outreach programs. The themes derived from the data were altruistic foundations, relational equity, exemplary pastoral leadership, organizational challenges, organizational agility and systems, and the centrality of God. Though these themes are distinct, they are interconnected. Altruistic foundations encompasses recognizing needs, compassion, and responding to needs through service. Relational equity is gained through relationships with the community (consistency and valuing people and human dignity), relationships among organizational members, and partnerships with other organizations. Exemplary pastoral leadership guides organizations through the senior pastors' visions, leading by example and relational equity. These two churches have faced challenges, but they have forged ahead with organizational agility and effective systems. The centrality of God fuels altruism, relationships, pastoral leadership, and organizational agility despite the challenges these organizations experienced.

Keywords: pastoral leadership, organizational culture, sustainable outreach, church

The Nurses' Perception of Their Immediate Supervisors' Servant Leadership Behaviors and Their Sense of Work Effectiveness in a Selection of Dar es Salaam Public Hospitals of Tanzania

Gladness E. Mtango
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between nurses' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and their sense of work effectiveness in a selection of Tanzanian public hospitals. I utilized servant leadership theory, which has its roots in Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf proposed that leaders adopt a servant position in

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their relationships with their followers. In analyzing servant leadership behaviors, I utilized the Essential Servant Leadership Behavior (ESLB) scale (Winston & Fields, 2015). I also used the Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire (CWEQ) II (Laschinger et al., 2001) to assess work effectiveness. Winston and Fields (2015) stated that the ESLB provides a valid theory and technique for measuring leaders' servant leadership behaviors, showing a strong relationship between servant leadership behaviors and followers' judgments on outcomes such as job satisfaction, trust, and low burnout, which are characteristics measured by the CWEQ II. I also chose the CWEQ II because it was specifically designed to measure nurses' perceptions of their direct supervisor's bureaucratic behaviors. The CWEQ II has also been proven to be valid and reliable, which fits the purpose of this study. Tanzania has shown interest in adopting servant leadership (Chandaruba, 2019). The study results suggest that there are perceived positive and statistically significant relationships between servant leadership and work effectiveness in Tanzania and differences in access to CWEQ II constructs by hospital size, except for access to opportunities, where no significant differences by hospital size were found. This study is the first known servant leadership study in the Tanzanian hospital system, thereby closing the gap in servant leadership theory and practice. Additional studies are recommended to replicate this study and to include other regions of Tanzania and other parts of the world. Using qualitative and mixed methods, together with other instruments for analyzing servant leadership and work effectiveness, is also recommended.

Keywords: servant leadership, essential leader behaviors, work effectiveness

Controlled Discipline: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Meekness and Its Application Among Entrepreneurial Leaders

Wesley R. Stewart
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Meekness is often misunderstood and confusing when applied in highly challenging, dynamic environments. For entrepreneurial leaders, the construct of a leadership strategy that incorporates virtues is frequently low on the list of priorities for business ventures and intraorganizational initiatives (Ciulla, 2020). However, the lack of an intentional and clear leadership strategy can undermine entrepreneurial endeavors, as much of a startup's success relies on the often-small cadre of professionals who work to achieve a vision amid the unique risks facing new ventures (Badura et al., 2020; Venus et al., 2019). This conceptual study examines meekness as a potential virtue that entrepreneurial leaders can adopt and embody as they strive to inspire and motivate

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followers to achieve a shared vision of success and realize their full potential. A qualitative analysis of recent literature on meekness in business and entrepreneurial endeavors, as well as biblical profiles in which meekness is contrasted with success and failure, was used to examine the holistic impact on follower outcomes. For biblical references, socio-rhetorical analysis of inter-texture was applied to ensure theological consistency with the biblical definition of meekness and its outcomes for both Moses and David. The study concludes with an examination of the rhetorical value of meekness as a virtue in entrepreneurial leadership strategy. It demonstrates the need for further research on the impact of meekness as a potential moderator of employee motivation and business outcomes in entrepreneurial ventures.

Keywords: meekness, leadership, strategy, entrepreneurial, virtue

Development and Execution of a Transformational Leadership Symposia Program in a Major Pharmaceutical Company – A Case Study

Wayne C. Shaw
Cairn University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

As mid-level leaders in a research department of a large pharmaceutical company, we recognized the need for broad cross-organizational leadership development. To address this need, we developed and executed a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices. We established eight foundational principles for the program—all based on biblical values and transformational leadership practices—and weaved these principles into each symposium of the program. We conducted 20 symposia on varied leadership topics over 2 years. We concluded that: (1) the model was well accepted in the large secular organization, with participant feedback demonstrating considerable learning and application of the biblically based foundational principles in the workplace; (2) there is no reason that these foundational principles and transformational leadership practices could not be effectively communicated in a similar manner within any large secular organization; and (3) this case study provides a model that could be used in other organizations.

Keywords: transformational leadership, leadership development, case study, biblical foundation, pharmaceutical industry

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Experience, Intelligence, and the Adult Third Culture Kid Advantage: A Qualitative Research Study

Elizabeth S. Wolfe
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

A deficit of empirical evidence exists on why and how adult third culture kids (ATCKs), those who have spent a portion or all of their childhood in a country outside their passport (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), who hold the potential to advantage in this arena, could thrive as set apart from peers raised in a mono-cultural setting. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study aimed to extend the research by utilizing the experiential learning theory (ELT) and the constructs of cultural intelligence (CQ), obtaining rich data from purposeful participants' lived experiences to answer the research question: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios? Data collection took place through virtual interviews with four ATCK participants gathered through convenience sampling. Three interview questions were asked. The analysis resulted in 25 concept codes, which were distilled into eight themes anchored to the ELT and CQ constructs. The results evidenced three advantageous skills: observation, empathy, and intuition. For ATCKs, these skills are embedded in core processes, advancing them to lead in culturally dynamic organizations. The lived experiences of the participants affirmed the theoretical validity of the ELT and CQ as aspects of professional acumen. Further research could extend the theoretical literature by investigating aspects of spiritual learning and practitioner literature by developing recruiting frameworks for organizations to employ ATCKs toward an inclusive culture and diversity management.

Keywords: experiential learning theory, cultural intelligence, ATCKs, leadership

Exploring Why Managing Followers Resist New Senior Leadership in High Senior Leader Turnover Environments

April E. Briant
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

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Abstract

Followers with managerial responsibility, referred to as managing followers, often resist, work against, or wait out their senior leaders in environments with frequent turnover of the senior leaders. This phenomenon results in diminished performance and difficulty in implementing important initiatives. Research as to the cause of this phenomenon is largely absent (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134). Learning the cause of this phenomenon will impact sectors prone to high senior leader turnover many of which are responsible for the well-being of society, including technology, non-profits, retail, healthcare, military, public education, and some industry (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134). Qualitative research conducted on six participants from the United States via Zoom regarding their experiences in a wide range of private, public, and government sectors of all sizes that demonstrated root causes of this phenomenon have strong connections to Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model stages of grief, the implicit leadership theory's prototype of leadership (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397), and the leader–member exchange dyadic working relationship (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). Further research is recommended.

Keywords: leader–member exchange dyadic relationship, grief, implicit leadership theory

The Impact of Organizational Spirituality on Employee Well-Being and Organizational Performance in Multicultural Workplaces

Jeffrey McKinney
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This research employs a unique qualitative strategy, utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the influence of spiritual leadership on organizational well-being and employee experiences. By using in vivo coding, the study captures participants' authentic voices, offering detailed, firsthand accounts of how spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation through genuine interpersonal interactions (RQ1/IQ1). The findings indicate that leaders' empathy and kindness, as demonstrated through effective communication, significantly enhance employee well-being and positively contribute to the organization's overall health (RQ2/IQ2). The study highlights that spiritual leaders' focus on listening to God's Word, along with their respect and empathy for followers, creates a supportive environment that links individual well-being with organizational success (RQ3/IQ3). This research offers unique insights into

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the connection between spiritual values and leadership practices, demonstrating that spiritual leadership fosters emotional bonds and enhances organizational performance. The results emphasize the importance of developing leadership programs that prioritize emotional intelligence, active listening, and spiritual inclusivity. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of spiritual leadership across diverse cultural contexts, with a focus on its adaptability to global workplace challenges and its role in promoting cross-cultural collaboration. The findings underscore the significant impact of spiritual leadership within modern organizational structures.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, empathy and kindness, interpersonal communication, spiritual leadership, organizational well-being

Professional Coaching

Beyond the Conversation: Coaching Practices that Foster Flourishing

Kelly M. G. Whelan and Diane M. Wiater
Regent University
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

This article highlights insights from two live panel discussions about professional coaching presented at the Regent University School of Business and Leadership 2025 Annual Roundtables. Three presenters from this event are featured in this reflective narrative. The live panels provided an opportunity for all professionals who recorded presentations to have a voice in the live element of the roundtables. These panel discussions advanced the professional coaching conversation, as presenters included research and ideas from recorded presentations. Among the highlights of the panels is the introduction of four little-known or new terms: First Lady Syndrome (Johnson, 2025), invisible labor, manufactured tension, and trauma literacy. The panel content elevated and advanced coaching understanding and practice. Our intention in this reflection is to honor the presenters' work and voice.

Keywords: coaching, First Lady Syndrome, manufactured tension, trauma, psychological safety

Leading Through Manufactured Tension: A Biblical Roadmap for Leadership Change and Renewal

Brandi Humphries
Regent University
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of "manufactured tension" as a strategic leadership framework for organizational transformation, drawing upon biblical narratives—particularly the leadership journey of Moses—and contemporary leadership theory. Using a case study of a construction-based organization facing cycles of ineffective leadership, fear-driven stagnation, and cultural misalignment, it examines how executive coaching served as a catalytic intervention for awakening awareness and driving change, illustrating how intentional disruption guided by servant leadership principles can challenge entrenched behaviors, foster courage, and generate momentum toward renewal. Grounded in biblical teachings and modern leadership scholarship, the paper introduces a five-phase model of transformation—Manufactured Tension, Confrontation with Courage, Vision Casting, Growth Through Uncertainty, and Entering the Promised Land—reflecting a progression from awareness to sustainability and emphasizing accountability, empowerment, and succession planning. Ultimately, it argues that when leadership aligns spiritual wisdom with practical coaching practices, organizations can break destructive cycles and move toward resilient, values-driven flourishing, underscoring the enduring relevance of biblical leadership principles in shaping adaptive, ethical, and sustainable organizational cultures.

Keywords: manufactured tension, biblical principles, leadership, coaching

Beyond the Role: First Lady Syndrome and Coaching as a Pathway to Flourishing

Cherelle Johnson
Regent University
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

This paper introduces *First Lady Syndrome* (FLS) as a conceptual framework for understanding the complex, often invisible leadership role of pastors' wives in Christian church settings. Though lacking formal authority or ordination, pastors' wives are frequently expected to serve as emotional anchors, spiritual caregivers, and public representatives of church leadership. Drawing on the concept of othermothering, this analysis identifies four interrelated constructs that combine to create a distinct and often burdensome role identity: role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. By naming these dynamics, FLS provides scholars, practitioners, and church leaders with a diagnostic lens to recognize the systemic and relational pressures pastors' wives face. Coaching is proposed as a strategic intervention that directly addresses these constructs by supporting boundary setting in ambiguous roles, fostering resilience against emotional strain, surfacing and validating invisible labor,

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and promoting authenticity in the face of image management. Integrating insights from coaching research on women leaders, this paper argues that coaching offers pastors' wives a structured, peer-based partnership that enhances self-awareness, strengthens confidence, and builds sustainable leadership capacity. FLS advances scholarship by formalizing a previously unnamed phenomenon, while coaching offers a practical pathway for flourishing. Together, they provide a framework for understanding and an evidence-based tool for supporting the well-being and leadership impact of pastors' wives within the wider ministry ecosystem.

Keywords: pastor's wife, othermothering, First Lady Syndrome, coaching, women in leadership, flourishing

Coaching the Wounded: Trauma-Informed Practices for Faith-Based Coaches

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

Christian coaching has become an increasingly vital practice in equipping individuals to pursue their purpose, foster leadership growth, and achieve spiritual maturity. However, many clients bring unacknowledged wounds from trauma that can shape how they think, feel, and lead. Traditional coaching models often overlook the profound impact of trauma on human flourishing. This paper introduces a biblically integrated, trauma-informed coaching model grounded in Dr. Rebekah Lloyd's trauma-informed leadership framework (2024). Rooted in *Isaiah 61*, the model emphasizes four core behaviors—understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—while maintaining clear ethical boundaries between coaching and counseling. Drawing on neuroscience, leadership studies, and biblical theology, this paper demonstrates that trauma-informed faith-based coaching not only prevents retraumatization but also fosters genuine flourishing, characterized by resilience, joy, and a sense of purpose in Christ. The paper concludes with implications for practice and future research on measuring flourishing outcomes and developing trauma-informed training for Christian coaches.

Keywords: trauma, faith-based coaching, trauma-informed, leadership

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Servant Leadership

Are We Good: How to Attain Stability, Equality, Growth, and Balance with Human Flourishing, Mental Health, and Servant Leadership

Joycelynn L. Green
Regent University
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

A delicate balance is essential to a holistic approach to well-being, one that integrates multiple dimensions of life, including the creation of safe and supportive learning environments, opportunities for personal growth, adaptability to continuous change, the promotion of human flourishing, mental health stability, and the practice of servant leadership. Robert K. Greenleaf's seminal essay, The Servant as Leader (1970), asserts that the most effective leaders are servants first. Greenleaf identifies key tools of servant leadership as the intentional use of language, deep listening, persuasion rather than coercion, awareness and foresight, and the practical measurement of outcomes. This paper examines the extent to which Greenleaf's model of servant leadership offers insight into the ways individuals and organizations can enhance human well-being and fulfillment. Central to this discussion is the enduring question of how individuals can cultivate goodness, stability, equity, growth, and balance while fostering human flourishing and maintaining mental health through servant leadership practices. The paper further explores the capacity of both leaders and followers to serve others within their respective roles while sustaining personal development and psychological well-being. Additionally, the paper addresses the domains of life most significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the heightened relevance of mental health, leadership responsibility, and supportive environments. By incorporating an examination of the PERMA model of well-being in relation to mental health and servant leadership, this study illustrates key implications for creating positive and resilient environments. Ultimately, the paper proposes an integrated framework that unites servant leadership, mental health, and human flourishing to offer a comprehensive perspective on how individuals and organizations can achieve harmony, equity, growth, and balance. In doing so, it aligns with Greenleaf's vision of leadership as a noble pursuit aimed at creating a "better time" for all.

Keywords: human flourishing, mental health, servant leadership, stability, growth

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Wounded Strength: A Theology of Resilience in Trauma-Informed Leadership

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

Leadership has traditionally been associated with decisiveness, authority, and emotional invulnerability. Contemporary research in trauma-informed leadership, psychology, and neuroscience increasingly challenges this assumption. It suggests that effective leadership often emerges from integrating personal adversity rather than avoiding it. This paper develops the concept of wounded strength, a theological and research-informed model. It reframes hardship as formative to leadership development rather than detrimental. Drawing on trauma theory, neuroplasticity research, spiritual formation, and servant leadership scholarship, the study examines how leaders grow through adversity and how this growth equips them to foster emotional healing in others. The trauma-informed leadership attribute of resilience provides the foundation for understanding wounded strength. By integrating neuroscience with biblical narratives such as Joseph, David, and Paul, the paper demonstrates how suffering can become a catalyst for wisdom, empathy, and transformation. Contemporary examples from the military, nonprofit, first-responder, and adoption contexts further illustrate how lived adversity strengthens leadership capacity. Additional sections on historical leadership paradigms, practical implications, and future research situate wounded strength within broader leadership discourse. Ultimately, this paper argues that trauma-informed resilience is not about returning to a pre-adversity state but about being reshaped through hardship. Leaders who embrace wounded strength are uniquely positioned to cultivate psychological safety, steward emotional healing, and foster flourishing communities in a traumatized world.

Keywords: trauma, wounded strength, resilience, leadership, organization

The 7-Stages of Disciple Making

Joshua Clark
Regent University
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

The modern church faces a crisis of discipleship, characterized by declining engagement, wavering faith, and a loss of clarity regarding what it means to follow

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Jesus faithfully. Despite unprecedented access to resources, there is growing confusion regarding Christian doctrine and the necessity of spiritual practices (Barna, 2025). Furthermore, churches often substitute programs and events for intentional disciple-making. This proposal presents a conceptual framework for a biblically grounded, theoretically informed model of discipleship that integrates servant leadership and followership theories. The 7-Stage Disciple Making Framework offers both theological conviction and practical application for discipleship development in diverse contexts. With this framework, leaders can be equipped to develop disciples and address wavering faith and declining mental health, thereby contributing to human flourishing. Many Christians struggle with spiritual development and overall disengagement with the Church (Barna, 2025). There is also a growing misunderstanding regarding Christian doctrine and what it means to follow him. Leadership studies have often regarded Jesus as a model leader, particularly in the context of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). However, direct, one-on-one disciple-making, from a followership and servant leadership perspective, is often neglected within the literature. This framework aims to address key questions in discipleship through a sequential series of steps. The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework is both conceptual and practical, drawing on scriptural exegesis, theological writings, leadership and followership theory, and lived ministry experience. Disciple-making goes through seven stages: Surrender, Self-Denial, Submission, Stewardship, Service, Sacrifice, and Suffering. Each stage enables disciples to assess their spiritual journey and development. By integrating this framework into the disciple-making process, Christian leaders are better equipped to develop disciples.

Keywords: servant leadership, discipleship, sacrifice, suffering, mentorship

Transformational Innovation

Cultivate Wise Christian Leaders Through wu-wei in an AI-Driven World

Maria Lai-Ling Lam
LCC International University, Lithuania
Roundtable: Transformative Innovation

Abstract

This study drew on a comprehensive body of literature on wu-wei, artificial intelligence (AI) social-technological systems, and three decades of reflective practice in higher education and business to examine how Christian business educators can prepare students for wise leadership in an era of AI-driven transformative innovation. It argued that integrating wu-wei—the Taoist principle of effortless action—into Christ-centered

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AI ethics offers wisdom for leadership formation, cultivating epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility. These qualities enable leaders to ethically navigate many disruptive changes, uphold Kingdom values, and envision alternative ecosystems that advance human flourishing, while fostering spiritual growth and critical digital literacy. Through the practice of wu-wei, leaders develop the capacity to intuitively discern essential elements of complex situations and seek synergy with patience and being fully present. They also experience the ideal state of effortless action or "flow" in their performance. They deepen self-awareness and collective consciousness for Christ's Kingdom, grounding wisdom in cultivated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of mind to the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Christ-centered AI ethics, wu-wei, epistemological flexibility, collective consciousness, synergy

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
REGENT UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & LEADERSHIP

HEARTH-led AI Integration: Balancing Efficiency and Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Human-Centric Leadership

Emaneli Barresi
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Rapid artificial intelligence (AI) adoption across industries brings both unprecedented opportunity and intensifying tension between efficiency and human flourishing. This article explored the HEARTH (Human-Ethics Approach for Remote & Tech-Hybrid) Team Leadership Model as a Christ-centered, human-centric framework for guiding ethical AI integration in organizational contexts. Drawing on literature in values-based purpose, human–machine dynamics, algorithmic risk, human-centric leadership, and Christian business ethics, the HEARTH model bridges the gap between technological advancement and biblical principles of justice, compassion, stewardship, and human dignity. A case study from HEARTH implementations highlights measurable relational and cultural outcomes aligned with flourishing. Implications for ethical leadership, AI governance, and future research validation are provided.

Keywords: AI ethics, human-centric leadership, HEARTH model, flourishing, Christian leadership

For Christian leaders, the challenge is no longer whether to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) or not but how to do so in a manner that honors human dignity, promotes flourishing, and preserves ethical integrity. Many workplaces experience a growing tension: organizations deploy AI to increase efficiency, while employees report intensified workloads, depersonalization, and moral ambiguity surrounding automation.

The HEARTH (Human-Ethics Approach for Remote & Tech-Hybrid) Team Leadership Model offers a values-based response to this tension. Initially developed for remote and technology-integrated teams, HEARTH is deeply human-centric, placing the values and well-being of individuals at its core. It provides a competency-based approach for leading in virtual and AI-augmented workplaces. Although widely relevant in secular and corporate settings, its foundations resonate deeply with biblical principles of

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justice, compassion, stewardship, and purpose. This article expands on the 2025 Regent Research Roundtable presentation and positions HEARTH as a path for leaders seeking to integrate Christ-centered, human-centric AI.

Literature Review

Values-Based Purpose in AI Adoption

Research has increasingly emphasized that meaningful AI integration requires alignment between organizational purpose and human dignity. Cheong and Lui (2025) argued that values-anchored innovation advances responsible AI and human–machine dynamics. Heslam (2021) highlighted the importance of aligning organizational purpose with human purpose, noting that flourishing is unattainable without clarity of intent in the use of technology.

Ethical Risks in Technological Acceleration

Scholars have warned that without ethical grounding, AI risks algorithmic bias, privacy violations, overautomation, and dehumanization (Kordzadeh & Ghasemaghaei, 202; Schultz et al., 20252; Sison, 2024; Thacker, 2022; van Wensveen Siker, 1989). As automation accelerates, it becomes crucial to maintain and empower human agency, especially when systems make decisions without transparent values.

Human-Centric Leadership Approaches

Human-centric leadership positions people at the center of organizational purpose and design. Reichenbach (2021) and Abbu et al. (2025) framed human centricity as essential for ethically integrating emerging technologies and mitigating alienation in digital environments. In contrast, deception and misleading leadership enabled by AI pose significant ethical risks (Scorici et al., 2024). Maintaining the centrality of human importance provides an anchor for Christian leadership.

Christ-Centered Business Ethics in Technology Integration

Christian ethics emphasize a moral anchor grounded in love, justice, integrity, and humility. Melé and Fontrodona (2017), Thacker (2022), and Mahoney (1989) noted that without such grounding, business ethics drift toward utilitarianism and moral compromise and risk introducing corruption. A Christ-centered ethic provides guardrails for leaders navigating the complex terrain of AI advancement. Together, these bodies of literature reveal a critical gap: organizations need leadership frameworks that combine a human-centric philosophy with ethical guidance suited to AI-driven workplaces.

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The HEARTH Team Leadership Model

HEARTH was designed as a competency-based leadership model for remote and tech-hybrid teams—those integrating AI, robotics, and other technologies as a team member—and emphasizes the centrality of human dignity in technology-mediated work (Barresi, 2025). It incorporates seven core principles: human-centric ethics; culture of innovation and adaptability; communication expertise; empathy and compassion; technical literacy; connection, inclusion, and visibility; and transparency and trust. These principles collectively guide leaders to prioritize humanity while leveraging technology.

Although created for general organizational contexts, HEARTH aligns naturally with biblical teachings. De Villiers (2018, 2021) highlighted that modern secularization requires Christians to actively seek consensus on values that are human-focused, such as stewardship, a justice orientation, and the leader's ethical posture. By identifying alignment with biblical principles, the HEARTH model provides a bridge between AI integration and Christian leadership values.

Biblical Integration: A Bridge Between Technology and Faith

Justice

AI systems can unintentionally perpetuate bias. A HEARTH-aligned leader proactively identifies, audits, and corrects such inequities. This reflects Micah 6:8 (*New International Version*, 2011): "Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly."

Compassion

Human-centric leadership ensures AI is used to lighten burdens rather than increase them. Compassionate design and deployment support Jesus' model of servant leadership.

Purpose

Ephesians 2:10 explains that humanity is created for good works and purpose-driven action. HEARTH frames AI and other modern technologies as tools to enable meaningful contributions rather than to replace them.

Stewardship

Christian stewardship calls leaders to care for people and resources responsibly. In AI contexts, leaders achieve stewardship through ethical data governance, transparency, and long-term systems thinking using person-focused foresight. These integrations

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demonstrate that HEARTH offers a practical bridge between faith-based ethics and contemporary technological realities.

Biblical Integration: Biblical Principles and Alignment With HEARTH

Human-Centric Ethics

Human-centric ethics align with the principle of stewardship of creation and regard for human dignity, as humans are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).

Culture of Innovation and Adaptability

Fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability using a human-ethics foundation aligns with the Christian principle of wisdom and discernment for new seasons (Is. 43:19).

Communication Expertise

Colossians 4:6 describes the Christian principle of speaking the truth with grace, requiring a practiced ethical and honest communication skill set for leaders. The integration of machine language introduces complexity and additional competencies that leaders must learn to succeed.

Transparency and Trust

Leaders must integrate new technologies with integrity and honesty (Prov. 11:3). With this framing, Christian leaders cultivate greater trust in human-focused outcomes.

Technical Literacy

Stewardship of gifts and resources (1 Pet. 4:10), challenges leaders to gain knowledge and awareness of how technology operates, the potential risks of AI design and use, and the deployment of these technologies for human benefit.

Connection, Inclusion, and Visibility

Unity in diversity and belonging in Christ (Gal. 3:28) are principles that align with the HEARTH element of connection, inclusion, and visibility, offering Christian leaders practical targets to incorporate when deploying AI in their organizations. Table 1 contains a summary of these alignments.

Table 1: Summary of HEARTH Principle Alignment With Biblical Principles

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HEARTH principle	Biblical principle	Scripture
Human-centric ethics	Stewardship of creation and human dignity	Genesis 1:27
Culture of innovation & adaptability	Wisdom and discernment in new seasons	Isaiah 43:19
Communication expertise	Speaking truth with grace	Colossians 4:6
Compassion & empathy	Loving one another	Ephesians 4:32
Transparency & trust	Integrity and honesty	Proverbs 11:3
Technical literacy	Stewardship of gifts and resources	1 Peter 4:10
Connection, inclusion, & visibility	Unity in diversity, belonging in Christ	Galatians 3:28

Case Study: HEARTH in AI-Integrated Teams

The HEARTH principles were delivered to a cohort of 10 learners through a structured, multimodal leadership development experience. Participants engaged with the model's theoretical foundations through pre-reading and then applied these concepts during an intensive 3-day cohort experience that incorporated targeted exercises, case studies, guided reflection, and collaborative learning. Consistent with adult learning theory (Allen et al., 2022), the program's varied instructional methods, combined with a comprehensive final exam, supported multiple pathways for knowledge acquisition, practice, and transfer. Learners contributed self-report data, leader or team observations, and engagement indicators to capture both immediate and long-term developmental outcomes, offering a holistic view of the program's impact.

The multiparticipant qualitative case study revealed several relational and cultural outcomes when HEARTH was applied in AI-rich or remote teams:

- Significant improvements in psychological safety
- Increased trust between leaders and team members

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- Reduction in stress related to automation and role uncertainty
- More transparent communication about AI's role and purpose
- Strengthened empathy and relational connection despite digital mediation
- Improved ethical awareness in project decisions

These ripple effects demonstrate that human-centric leadership does not hinder technological adoption. Instead, it enables healthier and more sustainable technology integration. Table 2 contains a summary of key themes from the synthesized data collected.

Table 2: Summary of HEARTH Case Study Impacts

Theme	Summary of participant insights
1. Application of learning	Daily use of empathy, transparency, and inclusive behaviors in routine leadership interactions
2. Adaptability to remote/hybrid contexts	Adjusted communication, increased check-ins, and accounted for time zones and varied work arrangements
3. Empathy and understanding	Heightened awareness of remote team challenges; applied compassion even during complex virtual interactions
4. Support for team well-being	Expanded well-being practices through experience-sharing sessions, burnout awareness, and individualized support
5. Feedback integration	Increased willingness to seek and act on feedback, refining meeting structures and engagement expectations
6. Transparency and trust	Strengthened trust via clear communication, visibility, and consistent contextual framing
7. Facilitation of collaboration	Promoted collaboration through cross-departmental coordination and intentional facilitation in remote teams
8. Technical literacy	Proactive use and recommendation of digital tools that

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Theme	Summary of participant insights
and tools	enhance connectivity and productivity
9. Encouragement of inclusion	Reinforced equitable participation and advocated for remote/hybrid members; used asynchronous channels effectively
10. Observable impact on team dynamics	Reported improvements in psychological safety, accountability, communication, participation, and cohesion

The Ethical Tension: Efficiency Versus Flourishing

A recurring theme in AI-focused workplaces is a mismatch between technological promise and lived experience (Burwell, 2025; Rayhan, 2024; Zirar et al., 2023). While AI promises more time, reduced burden, and increased creativity, many employees experience the opposite: higher expectations, reduced headcount (e.g., through automation of repetitive tasks), accelerated timelines (e.g., due to the need to keep up with rapid technological advancements), and pressure to "keep up."

HEARTH principles challenge leaders to take responsibility for shaping the AI workplace culture with a human-centric focus. Leaders applying this approach exhort their organizations to resist efficiency-only mindsets and instead cultivate environments where flourishing, including relational, spiritual, emotional, and professional, is central to organizational success.

Future Research Directions

The HEARTH model is positioned for expanded empirical validation using larger datasets.

Qualitative Research

- Interviews with AI-adopting leaders
- Case studies of HEARTH in digital transformation initiatives
- Narrative analysis of ethical decision making under AI pressure

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Quantitative Research

- Surveys linking HEARTH competencies to team engagement, trust, and flourishing
- Longitudinal studies of AI adoption outcomes under HEARTH leadership
- Statistical analysis of ethical indicators and performance measures

Long-Range Technological Considerations

HEARTH's relevance increases as organizations move toward the following:

- AI decision automation (2025–2030)
- Internet of things ubiquity (2025–2035)
- Quantum computing acceleration (2030–2035)
- Human-computer brain interfaces using AI (2035–2040)

These advancements require robust ethical frameworks grounded in human dignity.

Conclusion

The acceleration of AI adoption demands leadership approaches that safeguard humanity while embracing innovation. HEARTH offers a practical, Christ-centered, human-centric model for guiding this transformation. The case study data from leaders already employing these principles provide evidence of their roles in creating flourishing individuals and teams. As organizations navigate complex ethical terrain, leaders who prioritize justice, compassion, stewardship, and purpose can transform AI adoption from a pursuit of efficiency into a pathway of shared flourishing. Ongoing research and collaboration are essential to validate HEARTH as a biblically grounded, empirically supported model capable of shaping the future of ethical AI leadership.

About the Author

Dr. Emi Barresi is the creator of the HEARTH (Human-Ethics Approach for Remote & Tech-Hybrid) Team Leadership Model and a scholar-practitioner in human-centric, technology-integrated leadership. With more than 15 years of experience in project management, software and hardware development, and organizational leadership, she integrates ethical, future-ready, and faith-informed perspectives into her consulting and academic work. Her work focuses on AI ethics, remote teaming, human-centric leadership, and the intersection of faith and technology in modern workplaces.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: emi@hearth-teamleadership.com

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Understanding Resistance to Organizational AI Adoption

Dominic Frank
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-method case study was to understand why employees within an organization are hesitant to adopt large language models, demonstrate that quantitative scales can be used imperfectly to identify issues, and artificial intelligence (AI) can quickly help leaders understand these results and their associated risks and biases. When utilized ethically, AI can enhance organizational efficiency and support human flourishing (Spitko, 2024; Stahl et al., 2021). The two most common ways AI is employed within an organization are automating routine tasks and augmenting decision making (Bankins et al., 2024; Kulat & Pais, 2024). However, the introduction of AI within an organization often encounters stiff resistance (McCall, 2025; Weber et al., 2023). Therefore, this study used Armenakis et al.'s (2007) Organizational Change Recipients' Belief Scale (OCRBS) to assess employees' belief structures underlying their resistance and to identify the primary driver quickly. The OCRBS was administered to the organization's six-person administrative department and measured five dimensions: discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support, and valence. After the primary resistance driver of the discrepancy was identified, focused qualitative data were collected to confirm and better understand this finding. AI was also used to augment decision making by gaining a deeper understanding of any risks, biases, and ambiguous scale results. The results of this study contribute to existing theory by demonstrating the applicability of the OCRBS to understand resistance to AI; imperfectly applying scales to help identify change resistance; and the use of AI by practitioners and academics to augment decision making and explore challenges and issues.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, leadership, change management

If you were to search Google Scholar for a combination of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and human flourishing, the result would be in the thousands. While not every article or journal would apply, the returned scholarly articles and journals

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would largely conclude that AI supports human flourishing by augmenting decision making and automating routine tasks (Miller, 2022; Stahl, 2021; Zhao & Sun, 2025). For example, augmenting decision making, especially in healthcare, promotes human flourishing by identifying health issues more rapidly and accurately and by providing a more tailored medical or healthcare plan (Esteva et al., 2019; Miotto et al., 2018). Automation supports human flourishing by giving individuals time back to focus on more strategic and complex tasks or pursue personal interests (Abasaheb & Subashini, 2023). Since time is our most valuable resource, providing more time to an individual is one of the most significant ways AI enables human flourishing. However, most often, the adoption of AI within an organization is met with resistance.

The resistance to adopting AI was experienced firsthand when an administrative department resisted and ultimately rejected the use of a Chatbot to generate routine administrative documents. The administrative department consists of six individuals responsible for processing thousands of routine pieces of correspondence each year. To alleviate bottlenecks and recapture man-hours, leadership decided to implement a Chatbot. The Chatbot would automate a large majority of the annual correspondence and generate documents ready for routing and signature in Microsoft Word. However, as in other studies (Ivchyk, 2024), during the rollout phase, the Chatbot encountered significant individual behavioral resistance, leading to its rejection. The rejection confused leadership, as leadership viewed it to reduce individual burden and capture efficiencies in routine processes.

Given these challenges and the phenomenon's firsthand experience, this exploratory case study sought to accomplish two goals. First, it aimed to help leaders successfully navigate change resulting from the introduction of AI, specifically large language models, within their organizations. Next, it demonstrated that leaders can utilize AI to augment their decision making when faced with minimal information. This exploratory mixed-method case study achieved this through quantitative analysis supported by qualitative data to understand the primary behavioral resistance to adopting a Chatbot powered by a large language model within an organization. The Chatbot was designed to automate routine correspondence within the study's organization's administrative department, saving valuable time and resources. However, its adoption was rejected. Due to the small sample size of six, these results are neither definitive nor should they be used. Instead, the results are presented to stimulate further exploration of this phenomenon and to demonstrate how organizational leaders may imperfectly apply validated scales and quantitative methods, augmented with AI, to save time and resources by quickly identifying the primary behavioral resistance to change.

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Literature Review

Technology plays a significant role in an organization's ability to gain a competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). While it plays such an important role, it also impacts an organization in two distinct ways—through its product or its processes (Porter, 1985). While AI affects both areas, this study focuses on its impact on an organization's processes. Primarily, AI affects an organization's processes in two ways: automation (Abasaheb & Subashini, 2023; Daradkah et al., 2024) and augmentation (Akyazi, 2023; Shah, 2024). Both impacts require change, which is one of the most challenging roles a leader will face (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

R1: Can AI augment decision making to assist a leader in imperfectly applying a scale to identify the most significant change-resistant behavior?

Artificial Intelligence

Although AI has existed since the 1950s, it lacks a singular definitive definition (Enholm et al., 2022). For clarity, AI is defined in this exploratory case study as a nonbiological entity that possesses human-like capabilities, specifically reasoning, problem solving, and an understanding of its external environment based on the input it has received (Enholm et al., 2022; Eriksson et al., 2020; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). There are three types of AI—narrow, general, and superintelligence (Tegmark, 2017). The predominant types of AI technology used in contemporary organizations are machine learning, natural language processing, computer vision, expert systems, planning and scheduling, and speech synthesis (Frank, 2024). The technology used in the current case study was a large language model, which originated from natural language processing.

Natural language processing blends AI and linguistics to enable computers to understand the words within the human language (Jarrahi, 2018). Natural language processing uses computational techniques and algorithmic structures to generate text based on word co-occurrence within a dataset (Chowdhary, 2020). Typical uses of natural language processing include categorization, machine translation, spam filtering, and summarization (Khurana et al., 2023). While natural language processing technology formulates responses using only data from a specific dataset (Chowdhary, 2020), large language models use deep neural networks to generate responses based on contextual information and learned behaviors (Idan & Einav, 2025). Because of this ability, today's Chatbots are powered by large language models. Although Chatbots are widely used and have transformed the way machines and humans interact, the change required to adopt them within an organization often meets substantial resistance (Ivchyk, 2024).

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Organizational Change

Lewin (1951) posited that organizational change comprised three steps—unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Unfreezing refers to disrupting the current behaviors within an organization. Once disrupted and destabilized, the second step of moving can begin. In the second step, leaders motivate and encourage employees to learn new behaviors needed to support the change. Once learned, the final stage of freezing occurs. During this stage, the newly learned behaviors become the norm (Lewin, 1951).

When navigating change, a leader will often encounter resistance. There are two types of resistance—organizational and individual (Konopaske et al., 2018). Konopaske et al. (2018) concluded that organizational resistance includes structural inertia, perceived threats to the existing power balance, and organizational memory. At the individual level, resistance to change consists of behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Konopaske et al., 2018). While each dimension contributes to an individual's overall level of resistance, this exploratory mixed-methods case study focused only on the behavioral dimension. The behavioral dimension of change refers to an individual's physical actions or mental processes (Matlin, 1995). The Organizational Change Recipients' Belief Scale (OCRBS) is a validated instrument used by researchers to help determine which individual behavioral reaction is the primary driver in their resistance to change.

Organizational Change Recipients' Belief Scale

In the OCRBS developed by Armenakis et al. (2007), the authors posited that an individual's beliefs drive resistance. Therefore, the scale serves as a validated instrument for measuring individual beliefs that influence openness to change. The scale consists of five key individual dimensions—discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support, and personal valence. Discrepancy is defined as an individual's belief that a change is needed or a sense of urgency for the change (Armenakis et al., 2007). Appropriateness is defined as the individual's belief that the identified change resolves the current issue or challenge (Armenakis et al., 2007). Next, efficacy refers to the individual's perceived ability and capability needed for the change (Armenakis et al., 2007). The dimension of principal support refers to leadership's support for the change. Finally, personal valence refers to the attractiveness of the change's benefit or what is in it for me.

The use of these five dimensions provides a comprehensive understanding of how an individual perceives and will respond to change. While not explicitly used to understand change resistance to the adoption of AI, the scale is commonly used in organizational change research. Fatima et al. (2022) also concluded that valence is commonly the primary driver of change. Therefore, leadership selected the scale for this

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case study to save time and minimize current operations by quickly confirming valence was the primary driver or identifying the primary behavioral driver that led to not adopting the Chatbot.

H_1: Valence is the primary behavioral dimension that causes the Chatbot to be rejected.

H_0: Valence is not the primary behavioral dimension that causes the Chatbot to be rejected.

Methodology

This exploratory case study used a mixed-method approach. A mixed-methods approach was used to help leadership save valuable time and reduce operational impact. The study organization's administrative department consists of six personnel; therefore, the sample size for this study was six. The small sample size poses a threat to the study's findings. These threats include generalizability, multicollinearity, reduced statistical power, reduced precision and reliability, and increased random variation. Given these challenges, the results of this case study are exploratory and should be used only to stimulate discussion and inform future research into this phenomenon. The independent variables used in this case study were discrepancy, appropriateness, efficacy, principal support, and personal valence. The dependent variable was resistance.

Quantitative data were collected using the OCRBS. This is a Likert-scale questionnaire with 20 questions, with 1 indicating the individual *strongly disagreed* and 6 indicating they *strongly agreed*. Qualitative data were collected after completion of quantitative analysis. Once the primary driver of change was identified, a focused, in-depth interview was conducted to validate the finding and understand the individual's perception that supported their resistance.

In the spirit of using AI to enhance decision making, analysis was conducted using ChatGPT. OpenAI (2025) stated that ChatGPT uses Python and leverages Panda and NumPy, as well as custom functions, to produce results that are statistically equivalent to those of SPSS. The analysis conducted using ChatGPT included descriptive, reliability, and regression. Due to the small sample size and associated threats, ChatGPT was used to explore the quantitative results further and gain a deeper understanding of the risks and threats posed by the small sample size. Confirmatory factor analysis was not completed due to the small sample size.

Bias may exist in the study due to two primary concerns. First, the researcher was the organization's leader. Next, the participants were within the organization in which the researcher was a part.

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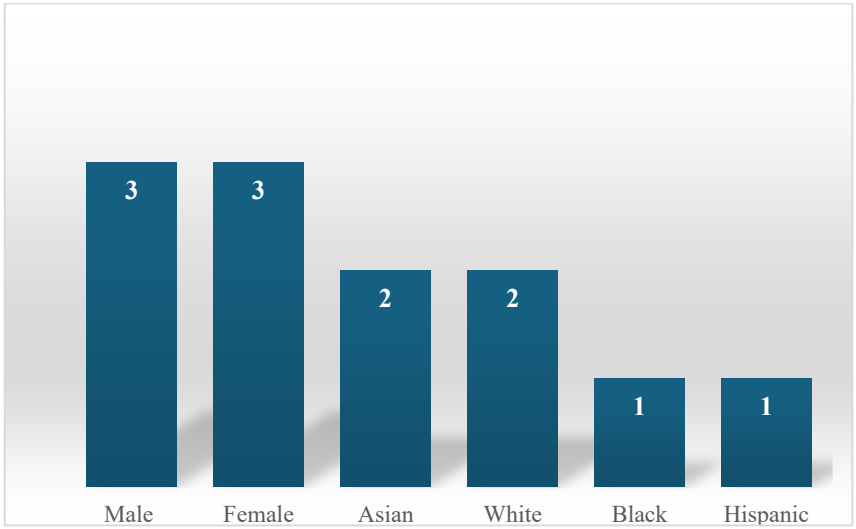
Data Analysis

The data collected from the study's participants reflected a diverse population (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Participant Demographics



Descriptive Results

Table 1 indicates that the dimension of discrepancy possessed the lowest mean. This result suggested that although there existed a general readiness to adopt AI within the organization, the case study participants perceived a limited need to do so. It must again be emphasized that, although the results align with theoretical expectations, they are exploratory due to the small sample size. The small sample size makes it possible for an outlier to significantly affect the mean.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis

Subscale	*N*	*M*	*SD*
DIS (Discrepancy)	6	3.50	1.04
APP (Appropriateness)	6	4.29	0.62
EFF (Efficacy)	6	4.46	0.43
PS (Principal Support)	6	4.54	0.53
PV (Personal Valence)	6	4.54	0.56

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Reliability Results

All subscales of the OCRBS were reliable, with scores above the normally accepted level of .70 (Nunnally, 1978). These results indicated that differences in the scores reflect genuine differences in beliefs rather than random noise. Thus, the conclusions are based on a valid and dependable scale rather than measurement error.

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha Results

Subscale	Items	α
DIS	4	.82
APP	4	.88
EFF	4	.84
PS	4	.86
PV	4	.91

Regression

First and foremost, regression analysis results should be used only to understand or visualize the direction and magnitude of a variable. Inferential tests are unreliable due to model saturation and multicollinearity. Furthermore, the variance inflation factor results indicated substantial multicollinearity, driven by the small sample size and high correlations among the predictors. R^2 was equal to 1.00 due to the small sample size of $n = 6$, indicating that coefficients should be interpreted descriptively instead of inferentially. The F statistic and p values are not meaningful with this n/p ratio.

However, the regression indicates that the discrepancy was the primary driver, as it had the largest absolute value. When viewing Figure 2, the resistance scale was reversed. Initially, resistance was coded so that higher values indicated less resistance. To align resistance with the OCRBS, the resistance items were reverse-scored so the regression coefficients could be interpreted correctly. The darker shade indicates that a higher belief results in lower resistance. In contrast, the lighter shade indicates that greater belief corresponds to greater resistance. In this instance, efficacy did not align with existing theory, which can be attributed to sampling variation caused by the small sample size.

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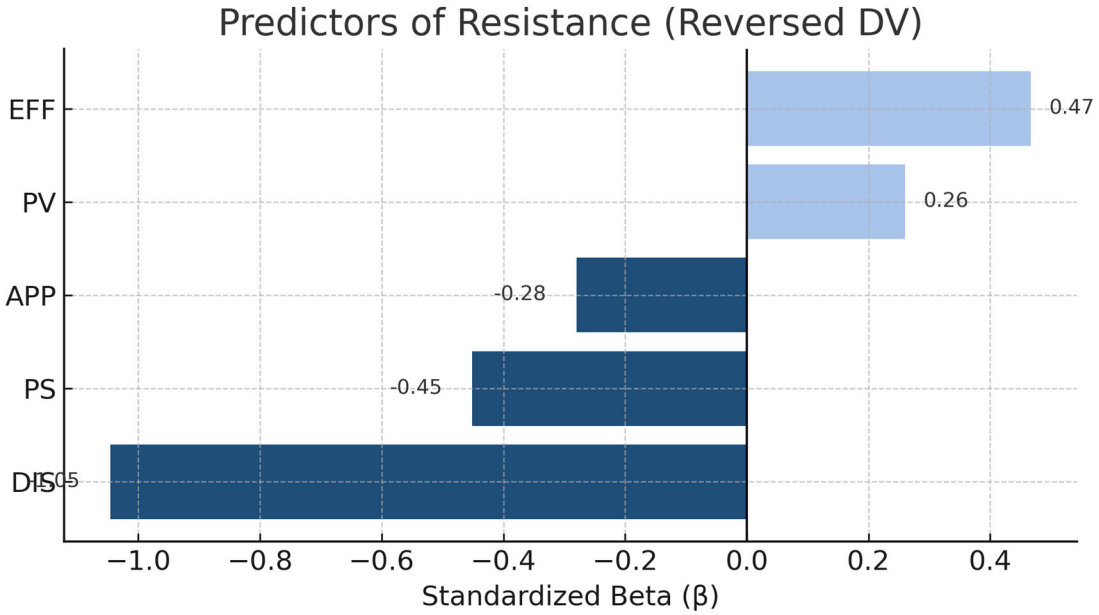
Figure 2: Regression Analysis



Although inferential tests are unreliable due to model saturation and multicollinearity, the researcher was able to quickly identify a primary belief driver. Once identified, ChatGPT was used to further explore this phenomenon. While further exploring, it must be noted that a researcher must have a working knowledge of statistics, as ChatGPT provided incorrect answers. These answers were largely contributed to rounding errors and improper prompting. However, a working knowledge can identify these challenges and readdress them through improved prompts. Once understood, questions were developed to validate that the primary belief was in discrepancy and to understand why individuals did not perceive the need for change.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data analysis focused on validating the regression findings and understanding the individual's perception of not needing to change. From these questions, two themes emerged. The first was that the individuals did not perceive a need for change. This finding validates the regression result that discrepancy was the primary belief driving resistance to change. Next, the individuals did not perceive the need to change as they viewed their current process of manually generating and correcting routine correspondence as adequate.

Discussion

Research Question 1 asked, can AI augment decision making to assist a leader in imperfectly applying a scale to identify the most significant change-resistant behavior?

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This exploratory case study demonstrated that it is plausible for a leader to use AI to utilize a validated instrument and to conduct quantitative analysis imperfectly.

An organizational leader faces many challenges and must often make informed, risk-based decisions. In this exploratory case study, the leader sought to adopt AI within the organization to capture efficiencies and alleviate bottlenecks downstream of the administration department. Upon rejection, the leader faced the decision to halt the administrative workflow to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis or to use other means to minimize workflow disruption while still exploring why the adoption of AI was rejected. While the risk of stopping the administrative workflow for an extended period was too significant to accept, the risk to the workflow from imperfectly using a scale and quantitative analysis supported by AI is much lower. The administration and collection of quantitative data for the OCRBS were completed in less than 30 minutes, which is nominally shorter than the typical time for in-depth qualitative data collection. While the challenges posed by such a small sample size were well understood, quantitative data analysis enabled leadership to quickly identify that the discrepancy was the primary driver of participants' resistance to change.

This finding aligns with and is supported by previous studies (Bowen et al., 2017; Draucker et al., 2020; Hastings, 2022; Olivier, 2017). These authors concluded that mixed-method approaches provided practitioners with a quick and efficient means to identify problem areas. Specifically, the scales were used for pattern detection (Olivier, 2017), as a triage tool (Bowen et al., 2017), and to guide targeted qualitative questioning (Draucker et al., 2020; Hastings, 2022). Once quantitative data analysis was completed, Bowen et al. (2017), Draucker et al. (2020), Hastings (2022), and Olivier (2017) all concluded that follow-on qualitative analysis was required and enabled deeper exploration and understanding of the issue. Furthermore, the utility results of the OCRBS used in this study align with previous research (Burgan, 2014). Burgan (2014) used the OCRBS in a mixed-method project management adoption case study and concluded that the scale is an effective means to quickly isolate a problem, while follow-up interviews provided clarity on why the scores were low.

The use of ChatGPT also enhanced the leadership's understanding and comprehension of the issue. The incorporation of ChatGPT enabled leadership to delve deeper into the results, allowing them to fully understand the risks associated with a small sample size and its impact on statistical results. The use of ChatGPT also enabled those unfamiliar with statistics to gain a better understanding of the context and the second- and third-order impacts of the results, allowing them to query and challenge each result throughout the process. For example, the use of ChatGPT highlighted that the results of quantitative analysis should not be viewed as statistically significant or inferential. Instead, these results should only be used to understand the direction and magnitude of each dimension and its influence on change resistance. However, it must be noted that

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ChatGPT also made errors. A lack of a basic understanding of quantitative research will confuse leaders and researchers, leading to incorrect decisions.

Next, with the results of data analysis and an understanding of the area and severity of risk, leadership was able to quickly validate imperfect quantitative results through focused follow-on qualitative data collection. Through a focused follow-on qualitative data collection process, the stoppage of the administrative department's workflow was minimized, and risk was reduced to acceptable levels. Furthermore, it enabled leaders to quickly apply the minimum amount of excess resources against the problem. Ultimately, this preserved the most valuable resource—time.

These findings build upon previous research (Seoni et al., 2023; Steyvers & Kumar, 2024; Taylor et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). These authors concluded that practitioners can successfully incorporate AI into their decision making when used to help identify emerging risks (Taylor et al., 2025), bias (Wang et al., 2025), probability patterns (Steyvers & Kumar, 2024), and explore incomplete or ambiguous scale results (Seoni et al., 2023).

This exploratory case study also rejected its hypothesis. Building on previous research, this study hypothesized that valence was the main behavioral factor influencing the Chatbot's rejection. However, the findings of this case study showed that discrepancy was the key dimension predicting rejection. Due to the challenges and risks associated with quantitative analysis, this result was further examined through qualitative methods. Focused interviews helped the researcher validate this conclusion. Additionally, all participants indicated that adopting AI was exciting and that they were eager to do so. However, when asked about the Chatbot's purpose and intent, they expressed that they did not see the need for change and considered it unnecessary. From this, it is reasonable to conclude that if a person does not perceive a need for change, it is unlikely to happen regardless of other factors. While unexpected, the finding that, regardless of all other variables, an individual must first perceive the need for the change was demonstrated in previous research. In research about this phenomenon, Rafferty et al. (2013) and Weiner (2020) concluded that without a perceived need for change, organizational change readiness collapses and change implementation fails. Simply stated, no perceived need equates to no actual change (Weiner, 2020).

Similar to previous research by Banerjee and Lowalekar (2021), this is an important finding because it suggests that leaders should craft their communication to explain why adopting AI addresses an organizational problem, rather than a departmental or individual one. For instance, while staff within the administrative department felt the change was unnecessary, they were unaware of the downstream bottleneck their manual processes was creating. Specifically, the administrative team manually drafts

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documents or manually updates received documentation. These manual inputs often introduce errors, leading to rejected documents that must be returned to the originator. This rework causes delays and slows down other administrative tasks and correspondence. To overcome this challenge, leaders can shape their messaging using a systems engineering approach. As Banerjee and Lowalekar demonstrated, a systems engineering approach to change highlights the interconnectedness and interdependencies among individuals and processes within an organization. Thus, communicating at the organizational level will increase understanding and, therefore, reduce resistance by decreasing the discrepancy behavior dimension.

Conclusion

This exploratory case study had four significant implications. First, this case study demonstrated the utility of using Armenakis et al.'s (2007) OCBRS in navigating artificial adoption within an organization. Second, it showed that, regardless of other behavioral dimensions, if an individual does not perceive a need for change, the change is unlikely to occur. Third, to reduce discrepancy-based resistance to change, leaders should communicate the need for change and its benefits at the organizational level or through a systems approach. This will improve communication by highlighting and drawing attention to the true purpose of the idea (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014) and showing the interdependence throughout the organization (Banerjee & Lowalekar, 2021). Finally, by augmenting decision making with AI, practitioners can imperfectly apply academic quantitative research methods to identify problems and quickly reduce their overall risk.

Future Research

Given the small sample size in this exploratory case study, future research should use a larger sample. As discussed, because of the small sample size, these results cannot be generalized to the broader population. Therefore, a larger sample will help validate and extend this study's findings. Additionally, this study was cross-sectional, so future research should use longitudinal methods to better understand resistance to adopting AI within organizations.

About the Author

Dominic Frank is a Commander in the U.S. Navy with over 30 years of service. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from Saint Leo University, an MBA from Texas A&M-Commerce, and a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Regent University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to dominic.r.frank@gmail.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Faithful Stewardship in the Age of AI: Christian Approaches to Governance in Higher Education

Elizabeth G. Beech
Avondale University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Currently, much research on AI governance focuses on frameworks for regulating AI technologies, particularly regarding student use and ensuring academic integrity and quality. However, this article explores how higher education institutions, particularly those shaped by and committed to a Christian worldview, can approach AI not merely as a subject of regulation but as a potential tool for enacting faithful stewardship and mission-aligned governance. Drawing on recent global research and current practices, this article examines the uptake of generative AI technologies in higher education governance. Special attention is given to relevant theological principles that inform their ethical implementation. Studies indicate that general mandates such as transparent communication, participatory policy development, and adaptive oversight are commonly used strategies for governance and risk management. Adopting a phenomenological perspective and incorporating examples from Christian higher education leaders in Australia, this article considers how Christian institutions can lead not only in critiquing AI's risks but in modeling responsible, value-driven integration into governance practices. The discussion highlights the potential for AI to assist with tasks such as policy drafting, compliance monitoring, and board or committee support, provided its use is guided by theological commitments to wisdom, human dignity, and relational accountability. Ultimately, this article argues that Christian institutions have both an opportunity and a responsibility to shape AI integration through a biblical lens of wise, relational stewardship. These theological commitments form the basis of a proposed framework for evaluating and piloting AI tools in Christian university governance.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, governance, higher education, Christian stewardship, generative AI

As artificial intelligence (AI) transforms the operations of higher education worldwide, questions arise not only about oversight of AI itself, but also how AI might assist with governance, policy development, and risk management within our universities, particularly those shaped by and committed to a Christian worldview.

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This article will explore how Christian higher education institutions can approach AI not merely as a subject of regulation, but as a potential tool for enacting faithful stewardship and mission-aligned governance.

Current Trends with AI in Universities

Generative AI is now widely used across universities, most prominently by students for study support and writing assistance, by faculty in preparing teaching materials and assessments, and by administrators in providing routine services and communications. Students turn to AI for summarizing readings, drafting essays, and generating practice questions, while faculty rely on it for developing course content and automating feedback. Administrators have adopted AI chatbots to answer common queries and draft routine communications, making it a visible presence at nearly every level of campus life.

While these uses are helpful, they represent largely operational and efficiency-driven applications. The deeper potential of AI in higher education, especially in Christian contexts, lies in enabling more thoughtful, participatory, and ethical governance. Beyond easing workloads, AI tools can support the analysis of large datasets for decision-making, enhance risk and compliance management, and help track the impact of policies and practices. Such applications can free leaders to focus more intentionally on mission, values, and human formation.

For Christian universities, the challenge and opportunity are to move from seeing AI only as a student aid or administrative convenience to embedding it in governance in ways that align with biblical principles of stewardship, transparency, and justice. Used wisely, generative AI can assist councils, boards, and leadership teams in strengthening accountability, improving oversight, and modeling responsible integration of technology that supports, rather than supplants, human judgment under God's authority.

This article will explore the intricacies of introducing generative AI to more effective governance within a Christian university context, from a phenomenological perspective grounded in personal experience and real-life, anonymous interviews with colleagues at similar institutions in Australia.

Negative Aspects of Gen AI on Human Flourishing

It seems most of the emphasis within our university contexts has been on the fear of how AI can be misused and the significant risks that can undermine human flourishing by exacerbating inequalities, eroding autonomy, and weakening human connections.

A major concern is that AI will worsen global and national inequality. The benefits of AI are predicted to favor people at the top, widening the income gap. AI is

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expected to endanger jobs. There is a significant power imbalance between the few "superstar" AI companies in wealthy nations and the emerging economies whose data is used for training models without compensation. This can increase poverty and social turmoil (Lam, 2024).

AI systems can perpetuate and amplify existing human and systemic biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes that harm marginalized groups and undermine justice. AI tools used in hiring, loan applications, and criminal justice have shown bias against women and racial minorities. This is often due to the models being trained on data reflecting WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) perspectives, which embed a narrow set of values and can lead to both representational and allocative harm (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Read, 2025).

Overreliance on AI can impede human flourishing by devaluing skills that take years to develop, such as empathy, critical thinking, and creativity. When people depend on AI for emotional support or decision-making, it can weaken their autonomy and ability to form deep connections with other humans. In educational contexts, a dependency on AI can lead to a superficial understanding of topics and erode critical thinking. The use of AI can depersonalize education and work, reducing individuals to mere data points and undermining the Christian ethical emphasis on human relationships and dignity (Lam, 2024; Sugiri, 2024).

In the workplace, using AI can lead to a "competence penalty," where individuals are perceived as less capable despite producing identical work. This fear of reputational damage discourages the very groups who might benefit most from using these tools, reflecting a form of rational self-preservation that ultimately wastes human potential (Acar et al., 2025).

The vast amounts of data required by AI systems raise serious privacy concerns. Without clear accountability, it becomes difficult to assign responsibility when an AI system causes harm, which conflicts with Christian ethical principles of moral obligation (Lam, 2024; Sugiri, 2024).

AI can nudge humans towards repeated practices and habits which could possibly shape virtues, but more likely can be misdirected to encourage certain vices (Schuurman, 2019).

How AI Facilitates Human Flourishing

However, one should consider some ways that AI has been found to enhance human capabilities, often scaling up effective, low-cost solutions, thereby contributing to several dimensions of flourishing.

AI applications in healthcare can significantly improve human health, a key component of flourishing. For example, AI-powered diagnostic tools can provide

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patients with rapid results that enable early intervention and help with making informed health decisions. Similarly, there are large language models already assisting medical professionals, leading to better healthcare outcomes and making healthcare more accessible to underserved populations, strengthening compassion for those in need (Lam, 2024; Sugiri, 2024).

AI can democratize access to high-quality education and professional development. In higher education, AI can offer personalized learning experiences tailored to individual student needs, which supports the nurturing of each person's unique potential. By automating administrative tasks for educators, AI can free them up to focus more on the relational and mentoring aspects of teaching that are crucial for students' holistic and moral development (Lam, 2024; Read, 2025; Sugiri, 2024).

By augmenting the capabilities of high-skilled professionals, AI can increase productivity and potentially lead to economic growth. For some low-skilled professionals, AI may even enhance their performance to match that of their high-skilled counterparts. Furthermore, new jobs related to AI development, data science, and ethics are being created, offering new employment opportunities (Lam, 2024).

There is a promise from GenAI to offload burdensome tasks, freeing human beings for higher purposes. Schuurman (2019) calls this a "creational possibility" that, by God's common grace, GenAI can be used for the positive good of people when properly directed.

AI in University Governance

There are numerous complex processes within a university that AI can streamline, freeing up faculty and staff to focus on mission-critical activities like teaching, mentoring, and research.

AI can automate and improve administrative workflows such as course approvals, curriculum reviews, and faculty evaluations. For document management, AI can automate the storage, retrieval, and summarization of records like tenure files and compliance reports, ensuring all required materials are correctly formatted and archived.

AI-powered tools can optimize complex scheduling for courses, classrooms, and events by balancing faculty availability, student demand, and facility constraints.

One of the most significant aids is in reporting and dashboard creation. AI can automate the labor-intensive process of generating annual compliance reports, enrollment-trend analyses, and learning management system (LMS) usage analytics. Predictive AI (PAI) can identify trends, detect anomalies, and even provide real-time academic risk assessments, allowing for early student interventions. This shifts the administrative focus from compiling data to making informed, strategic decisions.

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AI can enhance system integration, linking various platforms like the student information system (SIS), LMS, and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems to reduce data entry errors and ensure consistency. For communications, AI can draft contextualized emails and personalized notifications, such as reminders for accreditation deadlines or alerts to students about missing degree requirements, ensuring consistency with institutional values.

AI can automate housing assignments, process maintenance requests via chatbots, and manage event logistics, analyze space utilization to optimize residence life operations, and use AI-powered apps to track attendance at campus events. AI could aid career counselors by automating resume reviews and using algorithms to match students with relevant job postings and internship opportunities. AI-powered "copilots" can assist students with interview preparation, providing 24/7 access to career coaching.

AI scheduling assistants can streamline counseling appointments, and chatbots can handle non-urgent mental health FAQs, improving accessibility and reducing staff workload. Critically, AI-powered early-warning systems analyze performance and engagement data to identify at-risk students, enabling timely interventions to improve retention.

For university research administration, AI-enhanced platforms can dramatically improve efficiency in securing funding. AI assistants can also help draft and format proposals, check for compliance with funder guidelines, and automate repetitive tasks, allowing researchers to focus on innovation.

Beyond considerations of GenAI being used in academic work, there are many ways it could be used to enhance productivity.

Personal Experiences of Christian Higher Education Colleagues

Christian higher education colleagues all agree that AI has enhanced productivity for overstretched teams. For example, one committee minute-taker told how they now complete in days what used to take weeks. Another colleague observed:

> From experience, we've found AI can drastically cut time in tasks like course reviews or policy searches—but always with human checking. One colleague described it as a "critical friend" that can point out areas for improvement yet never replace responsibility for accuracy or judgment. (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 23, 2025)

Yet another said:

> Today I was able to compare, combine, and benchmark two outdated policies, coming up with a new, modernized and relevant draft in 46 seconds. As a

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> small provider, certainly, there is value in the time and money that was saved! (Interviewee 3, personal communication, October 24, 2025)

Barriers to the Adoption of AI Tools

Generally, in Australian higher education, GenAI adoption is slow for fear of regulatory consequences. As one analyst observes, "Universities must stop treating AI as a compliance risk and start treating it as the transformative tool it truly is" (Burgess, 2025).

A researcher in Australia has analyzed the strategic documents of universities in the UK, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and found some sector-wide trends as to their adaptive structural posture and their strategic framing of AI. Not surprisingly,

> only 6 of the 28 institutions (21%) connected AI to broader existential questions about the future of higher education or society. Even then, the framing was more competitive than transformational: a call to adopt AI faster than rivals, with no acknowledgment that AI may fundamentally disrupt the sector's core value proposition. (Brawley & Byers, 2025)

Christian higher education institutions were not included in this initial review, but they also face a complex array of barriers to adopting artificial intelligence (AI). These obstacles are not merely technical or financial; they are deeply intertwined with theological principles, ethical concerns, institutional culture, and operational realities. The barriers can be categorized into operational, sociocultural, and theological and ethical challenges.

Operational and Institutional Barriers

While AI offers powerful tools for administration, current research emphasizes that its adoption is not without challenges. Christian higher education institutions, particularly smaller liberal arts colleges, face significant operational hurdles related to resources, infrastructure, and governance.

Many Christian institutions, especially liberal arts colleges, operate with fewer resources than large research universities. The high cost of AI implementation—including hardware, software licensing, and specialized staff—is a major barrier. For example, a modest graphics processing unit (GPU) setup represents a major capital expenditure, which is prohibitive for many. Furthermore, infrastructure deficits like unreliable internet and limited hardware, particularly in regions like Africa, severely hamper AI adoption (Read, 2025; Sangwa et al., 2025).

The proliferation of uncoordinated, piecemeal AI tools across different departments (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs) also creates significant inefficiencies. This

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fragmentation leads to data silos, duplicate data entry, and inconsistent record-keeping, which undermines the potential benefits of AI and complicates holistic student support. A lack of interoperability between systems like the LMS, SIS, and advising platforms is a persistent challenge (Read, 2025).

There is also a significant lack of comprehensive frameworks and clear institutional policies for guiding AI use. In the absence of clear rules, faculty and staff are left to navigate complex ethical issues on their own. Many institutions have not yet established robust data governance, policies on academic integrity, or disclosure norms. This is compounded by a lack of adequate training for faculty, staff, and students on AI literacy and ethical use, which is necessary for responsible adoption (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Kemigisha, 2025).

Finally, AI systems trained on biased data can perpetuate and amplify discrimination based on race, gender, and other protected characteristics. This exposes institutions to significant legal risks under state and national laws, which require transparency in evaluations and anti-discrimination statutes. The opaque nature of many AI algorithms makes it difficult to comply with these legal standards. Furthermore, the use of unauthorized "shadow AI" tools by employees fearing the competence penalty creates additional data security and compliance risks (Acar et al., 2025; Cole, 2024; Read, 2025).

Sociocultural and Reputational Barriers

Beyond institutional limitations, the social dynamics within an institution can significantly impede AI adoption, particularly through what one source identifies as the "competence penalty." Research shows that individuals who use AI are often perceived by their colleagues as less competent, even when their work is identical in quality to that of non-users. This competence penalty acts as a powerful deterrent, making faculty and staff hesitant to adopt AI tools for fear of professional and reputational damage. This penalty is more than twice as severe for women, who face a 13% reduction in perceived competence compared to 6% for men. This dynamic reflects a form of rational self-preservation that slows adoption (Acar et al., 2025).

The competence penalty disproportionately affects stereotyped groups, such as women in tech-heavy fields or older workers. Since non-adopters, who are often in the majority, tend to be the harshest critics, this creates an environment where those who might benefit most from AI feel they cannot risk using it. Instead of leveling the playing field, making AI more widely available can unintentionally increase bias (Acar et al., 2025).

Widespread adoption requires an environment of psychological safety where individuals can experiment with new tools without fear of judgment. In many institutions, influential skeptics and non-adopting senior colleagues can create a

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climate where using AI is professionally risky, especially for junior staff or members of minority groups (Acar et al., 2025).

Across some of Australian colleagues' higher education institutions, there has often been confusion about GenAI adoption:

> "One of our execs said, 'I've asked three different people if I can use GenAI for this assignment and got three different answers.' That shows the lack of clarity and fuels uncertainty" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 23, 2025).

Sometimes there is a fear of job loss:

> "If we embrace this and roll it out across the organization, is anyone going to lose their job? We've had to reassure staff this is about maximizing limited resources, not cutting people" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 23, 2025).

Another recurring theme in interviews with colleagues was uneven adoption. It was mentioned that adjunct staff often miss training, leaving gaps in practice. Other staff and faculty hesitate to use AI, fearing a competence penalty if their AI use is disclosed. In some faculties, "particularly theology, the silence is striking when these should be the very spaces leading ethical reflection" (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 22, 2025). These barriers are a reminder that adoption is not only technical but deeply cultural and even theological.

Theological and Ethical Barriers

Christian ethics, grounded in principles of human dignity, justice, and community, also presents foundational challenges to unchecked AI adoption. A primary concern is that AI could depersonalize education and undermine the relational aspects central to Christian pedagogy. Christian education emphasizes the teacher-student relationship for moral and spiritual formation. Over-reliance on AI risks reducing students to data points and weakening the authentic human connections that foster community and spiritual growth. There is a fear that AI cannot and should not replace the mentor's role in guiding students' moral and spiritual development (Kemigisha, 2025; Sugiri, 2024).

AI systems must be carefully designed to align with biblical values like compassion, empathy, and kindness. There is a risk that AI, driven by logic and data, may operate in ways that are misaligned with Christian morality. AI's integration must always be guided by theological reflection to ensure it supports, rather than diminishes, spiritual growth. This includes ensuring AI-delivered content does not promote ideologies that conflict with Christian theological traditions (Kemigisha, 2025; Sugiri, 2024; Zheng & Yu, 2024).

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Christian ethics also stresses human responsibility and accountability; however, AI systems, particularly "black box" algorithms, complicate this by making decisions that are not easily explainable. This creates a dilemma: if an AI system makes a harmful decision (e.g., biased grading), it becomes unclear who is responsible. Obviously, AI itself cannot assume moral or legal accountability, but, especially within Christian institutions, there should be an emphasis on clear personal responsibility (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Read, 2025; Sugiri, 2024; Zheng & Yu, 2024).

One leader stressed,

> Let's not think that AI has got [sic] any access to the Holy Spirit. It's a tool, and as long as we remember that, we'll be in a much safer spot than if we start to think of it as a friend. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 22, 2025)

Another reassured their staff that the goal was not job loss but supporting human-centered work. These reflections from higher education leaders highlight the Christian ethical frame: AI must never be idolized or allowed to devalue human dignity, but should serve relationships, truth, and accountability.

Overcoming Barriers

To overcome these barriers, Christian higher education institutions must develop intentional, mission-aligned strategies that prioritize theological reflection, foster psychological safety, invest in integrated systems, and establish clear, participatory governance.

A piecemeal, uncoordinated adoption of various AI tools across departments can create data silos, inefficiencies, and conflicting systems. To be effective, institutions should prioritize integrated platforms or middleware solutions that connect different systems, creating a unified data ecosystem that supports holistic student support and coherent administration (Read, 2025).

Administrative AI tools handle sensitive student data, creating risks related to privacy, bias, and legal compliance with regulators. AI systems may perpetuate biases in areas like housing assignments or career recommendations. Therefore, human oversight is paramount. Administrators must ensure transparency, audit algorithms for fairness, and maintain human involvement in final decision-making (Dabis & Csáki, 2024; Read, 2025).

For mission-driven institutions like liberal arts or Christian colleges, AI must be implemented in a way that supports core values like community, human dignity, and holistic development. The goal is to use AI to augment and enhance, not replace, the human-centered relationships that define these educational experiences. For example, AI-generated principles for a Christian college emphasized upholding

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biblical principles and stewardship, while those for a progressive college focused on global citizenship and sustainability, showing how AI can be adapted to reflect specific institutional values (Read, 2025).

Foundational Theological and Ethical Principles for AI

Christian ethics, grounded in biblical teachings, offers a robust framework for evaluating AI technologies. Core principles include love, justice, compassion, and the inherent dignity of all individuals as created in the image of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Genesis 1:26–27). These tenets provide a moral compass for integrating AI in a way that promotes human flourishing and aligns with a Christian worldview.

A proposed framework for Christian universities should be built on the following theological pillars (Read, 2025; Sugiri, 2024).

Upholding Human Dignity (Imago Dei). The belief that humans are created in God's image is central. AI should, therefore, serve, not undermine, human dignity. This means AI tools must not depersonalize education or reduce students to mere data points. Human oversight and responsibility are paramount, as AI systems can never replace ultimate human accountability.

Pursuit of Justice and Equity. Christian ethics calls for the protection of the vulnerable and marginalized. When implementing AI, universities must ensure that the technology does not exacerbate existing inequalities or create new ones. This involves auditing algorithms for biases that could unfairly discriminate against students based on race, gender, or socioeconomic status, ensuring equitable access and outcomes.

Responsible Stewardship. The principle of stewardship requires the wise and ethical management of all resources, including technology. AI should be used to enhance human flourishing and the common good, with careful consideration of its long-term societal and environmental impacts.

Fostering Community and Relationships. Christian education emphasizes the importance of community and the teacher-student relationship for moral and spiritual formation. AI should be used to strengthen these relational aspects, not create isolation. The goal is to use AI as a tool that complements and enhances human interaction, freeing educators to focus more on mentorship.

Commitment to Truth and Transparency. A Christian commitment to truth demands transparency in how AI systems operate and how data is used. Institutions must ensure that decision-making processes involving AI are explainable and that students' personal data is protected.

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> This emphasis on transparency was evident in the intentions of those interviewed:
>
> We flagged to our board that the report was generated from our own data with the assistance of this tool and reviewed by staff. We stand behind the data because we personally used and verified it. I think you need statements like that — don't hide AI use. (Interviewee 1, personal communication, October 22, 2025)
>
> "We decided: don't demonize it, don't fear it. Bring it out of the shadows and make it an everyday part of work and teaching—transparently (Interviewee 2, personal communication, October 23, 2025).

A Proposed Framework for Evaluating and Piloting AI in Christian Universities

Drawing on these theological principles and practical governance, a phased framework is proposed for Christian universities to begin to ethically evaluate and pilot AI tools.

Phase 1: Foundational Policy and Ethical Alignment. The first phase should focus on establishing a strong ethical and policy foundation through collaborative dialogue.

- Create a task force comprising theologians, educators, administrators, IT staff, and student representatives. This ensures that diverse perspectives inform the governance process.
- The task force should draft guiding principles for AI use that explicitly connect to the university's Christian mission. These principles should address core values like human dignity, justice, and stewardship. For instance, a guiding principle might be: *We are dedicated to the ethical application of artificial intelligence and to ensuring its use upholds biblical principles, respects human dignity, and serves to advance Christlike character and stewardship*.
- Map the university's "penalty hotspots" where biases could be amplified, such as in admissions, student support, or evaluations. Simultaneously, identify administrative areas in academic and student affairs where AI can enhance efficiency without compromising core values, such as in scheduling, reporting, and workflow management.
- Based on the assessment, draft clear policies on data privacy, AI disclosure, and academic integrity. The policies should mandate transparency, requiring that any AI-generated content in administrative reports or student assessments be clearly identified and verified by a human. These initial drafts should be piloted in a limited number of departments to test their feasibility.

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Phase 2: Capacity Building and Piloting. The second phase would center on education, training, and controlled implementation to ensure transparent and responsible use.

- Implement comprehensive training programs for faculty and staff on AI literacy, focusing on both the practical use of approved tools and the ethical principles established in Phase 1. This training should equip staff to critically evaluate AI outputs and guide students in responsible use.
- Select specific, low-risk administrative functions for piloting AI tools. For example, use AI to automate course scheduling, generate initial drafts of accreditation reports, or assist in grant discovery. In student affairs, pilot AI chatbots for routine inquiries or scheduling, while ensuring sensitive areas like mental-health triage remain under strict human oversight.
- Encourage open conversation about AI's benefits and risks. Identify and support respected faculty and staff, especially women and other underrepresented groups, to act as visible role models for ethical AI adoption. This helps create psychological safety and reduces the competence penalty, where individuals fear being judged for using AI.
- Ensure that all communication regarding AI pilots is transparent. For instance, course syllabi must clearly state the instructor's policy on AI use, using a multi-level framework (e.g., prohibited, use-with-permission, full use with attribution) to provide clarity for students.

Phase 3: Evaluation, Adaptation, and Scaling. The final phase should be dedicated to assessing the impact of the pilots and refining the governance framework for broader, ethical implementation.

- Systematically evaluate the pilots against predefined key performance indicators (KPIs) and the university's ethical principles. This includes measuring efficiency gains (e.g., reduction in feedback time) and auditing for unintended biases or harms (allocative, representational, or procedural).
- Redesign evaluation processes to focus on outcomes rather than methods. For example, shift performance reviews from subjective competence ratings to objective metrics. In academic contexts, this may involve moving toward assessments like oral presentations or in-class projects that are less susceptible to AI misuse.
- Address the challenge of fragmented, uncoordinated AI tools by investing in integrated platforms or middleware solutions that connect disparate systems (e.g., linking retention data with career services). Crucially, ensure that all systems are designed with a "human-in-the-loop," where AI serves as an assistant to augment, not replace, human judgment and relationships.
- Based on audit results and community feedback, refine the AI policies and strategically scale successful pilots. The governance framework should

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remain adaptive, with regular reviews to address the rapid evolution of AI technology and its ongoing alignment with the university's Christian mission.
- By adopting this phased, theologically informed framework, Christian universities can navigate the complexities of AI, harnessing its potential to enhance their mission while proactively mitigating ethical risks and fostering a community where technology serves to promote human flourishing.

Navigating the Impact for Greater Flourishing

To ensure AI serves human flourishing, this article, based on research and phenomenological insights, advocates for a balanced and intentional approach that prioritizes human values. This includes:

- **Developing "safe AI":** Instead of developing AI and then attempting to constrain it, the focus should be on building systems that are deemed beneficial from the start.
- **Steering innovation:** AI innovation should be directed toward efficiency-amplifying applications to promote shared prosperity and mitigate job displacement.
- **Inclusive governance:** A broad range of stakeholders should be involved to ensure that diverse perspectives and needs are considered.
- **Human-centered and theologically informed integration:** In all contexts, but especially in mission-driven ones like Christian education, AI should be a tool that augments, rather than replaces, human judgment, relationships, and oversight. Integrating Christian principles, such as compassion, justice, and stewardship, can provide a moral compass for AI's application.

As colleagues discussed when interviewed, Christian universities must keep AI in its proper place. It is a tool that can serve, but never replace, human judgment or the Holy Spirit's guidance. Staff highlighted the need for transparency, accountability, and explicit assurance that AI will not undermine dignity or jobs but support relational outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, they emphasized that one should not demonize or fear AI, but bring it out of the shadows, engaging openly and ethically so that it strengthens, rather than weakens, our shared mission of faithful stewardship and human flourishing.[1]

About the Author

Elizabeth Beech holds a PhD from Regent University (VA) in Organizational Leadership as well as a Master of Theological Studies from Southwestern Baptist

[1] This report used AI-assisted tools, including NotebookLM (Google, 2024), Elicit (Ought, 2025), and ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025), to compare over 50 academic sources and support the organization, summarization, and drafting of research materials; all analysis and conclusions are the author's own.

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Theological Seminary, and degrees from Asbury University (B.A.) and Azusa Pacific University (M.A.).

Dr. Beech returned to Australia in 2022 after establishing a new graduate program in organizational leadership at Toccoa Falls College in northeast Georgia, USA. She was recently the director of graduate studies in the School of Education at Alphacrucis University College in Parramatta (Sydney), New South Wales and is currently serving as the senior officer, University Governance and Risk at Avondale University in Cooranbong, New South Wales.

For several years, Dr. Beech was the academic dean of the National Institute for Christian Education (NICE) in New South Wales, Australia, which is the postgraduate (Master of Education and Master of Education [Leadership]) arm of an association of Christian schools, focusing on transformative worldview education related to teaching, curriculum, administrative leadership, and school governance throughout Australia and beyond. Dr. Beech served in various roles at the Universidad Evangelica Boliviana, participating in teaching and university administration as well as mission projects in Bolivia, South America for over 20 years. She oversaw international and multicultural programs at Palm Beach Atlantic University, Florida, USA, before her initial move to Australia.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Elizabeth Beech, beth@lifeworldeducation.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Evaluating AI Translation for Global Entrepreneurship Education: A Stakeholder Flourishing Approach

Autonnette McLaughlin, John Mulford, and Jason Benedict
Regent University
Roundtable: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

Organizations implementing artificial intelligence (AI) for educational expansion face competing priorities between technical optimization and stakeholder impact. We examined how the principles outlined in John 10:10 inform AI implementation decisions aimed at fostering stakeholder flourishing. John 10:10's principle of an abundant life provides practical decision criteria: Does this technology benefit stakeholders or promote institutional efficiency? We examined AI translation evaluation for a global entrepreneurship education platform that is expanding beyond English-speaking markets. The analysis included professional consultations, manual testing, and evaluation across three solution categories: professional translation services, DIY/manual translation solutions, and browser extension solutions. The analysis built on a literature review of AI implementations, as documented in Harvard Business Review and MIT studies, to inform the stakeholder-centered approach. The analysis compared stakeholder-focused criteria with technical optimization approaches, identifying where principles of abundant life influence accessibility choices over automation and efficiency. Results demonstrate associations between the principles of abundant life and stakeholder flourishing through expanded access (Mayer et al., 2025), resource preservation, and multistakeholder consideration. The abundant life approach led to recommending immediate student-controlled translation access instead of waiting to implement institutional automation solutions. The chosen strategic option enables validating student demand before making a resource investment. This research presents a methodology for integrating biblical principles into AI implementation, offering insights into humanistic technology stewardship.

Keywords: artificial intelligence (AI), stakeholder flourishing, native artificial tongue

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Introduction

The globalization of online education requires institutional leaders to assess translation technologies to deliver multilingual content. In this Phase One study, we examine the technical feasibility of translation solutions for a virtual business development center using the Thinkific (2012) learning management system (LMS). Zhu et al. (2024) reported that artificial intelligence (AI) integration drives innovation, value creation, and user centricity. The virtual business development center could achieve a similar transformation (Ee, 2025; Hughes, 2024) by implementing translation services. We evaluate whether technologies meet both technical requirements and stakeholder flourishing criteria (Israeli & Ascarza, 2025). We ground stakeholder flourishing in the principles of an abundant life, as outlined in John 10:10, using these principles to inform decision-making criteria beyond technical optimization. The research question is, does this technology benefit stakeholders or promote institutional efficiency? To answer this question (Hoque, 2025), we assess whether translation of course content is technically and operationally feasible within the existing LMS infrastructure constraints. We evaluate multiple solution categories based on their implementation requirements, cost, and scalability. At the same time, we prioritize student access, educator workflow preservation, and administrative feasibility.

Translation technology ranges from professional translation services with deep platform integration to student-activated browser extension solutions that utilize existing infrastructure. Between these are semi-automatic document processing solutions and manual translation workflows, each with different time investments, quality control mechanisms, and maintenance requirements. Educational administrators must match solution capabilities (Weill et al., 2024) to organizational constraints, using criteria addressing both stakeholders and institutional efficiency.

In this assessment, we conducted vendor consultations, beta-tested the course content, and compared nine translation technologies. We prioritized hands-on technical validation over vendor marketing claims because we encountered implementation barriers during deployment, not during sales presentations. We focused on identifying 'blockers' — technical requirements that prevent solution deployment, regardless of other favorable characteristics. We evaluated how different solutions affect students seeking course access, educators maintaining pedagogical quality (Vistatec, 2024), and administrators managing implementation.

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Literature Review

Translation Technology in Educational Contexts

Translation technologies within LMSs have received little attention in the educational technology literature. Machine translation quality has improved with the use of neural network architectures (Gordon, 2024; Johnson et al., 2017). Still, the integration of LMS introduces platform-specific constraints that research in translation studies does not address.

The evolution from rule-based statistical to neural machine translation (Gordon, 2024) reflects 'emergent theory' development, where research questions evolve into strategies (Eisenhardt,1989; Mintzberg, 1978). Current AI translation uses large language models to achieve fluency, control terminology, and estimate quality (Vistatec, 2024). The shift toward personalization enhances context understanding from software, documents, and course content (Wharton, 2024a; Wharton, 2024b). AI translation differs from traditional machine translation in that it achieves a level of fluency and contextual awareness almost on par with that of humans (Läubli et al., 2018). Deep learning models enable continuous learning and improvement cycles that conventional statistical models cannot reach.

Multilingual content delivery for education differs from general web translation. Course materials include specialized terminology, embedded multimedia content, and structured learning sequences requiring contextual coherence across translated materials (Garcia & Wei, 2015). Translation quality (Vistatec, 2024) significantly impacts comprehension and encompasses cultural adaptation and disciplinary discourse conventions (Drucker, 2002; Rudko et al., 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of AI translation from 2016 to the present, highlighting key shifts in technology capabilities (Kuhn, 2012) and implementation concerns. In 2016, researchers prioritized computational efficiency and technical optimization in machine translation development (Mitchell, 2016). Between 2016 and 2018, developers advanced translation from rule-based to statistical to neural machine translation. Researchers achieved fluency, control over terminology, and quality estimation capabilities using large language models (Vistatec, 2024). Developers moved translation from literal word replacement to contextual understanding through deep learning architectures.

By 2018, research incorporated human judgment (Läubli et al., 2018) for translation quality assessment. This trigger marked a shift (Kuhn, 2012) from purely technical metrics to human-centered evaluation. In 2019–2020, Zuboff (2019) documented concerns about surveillance capitalism and data monetization. In the field of translation

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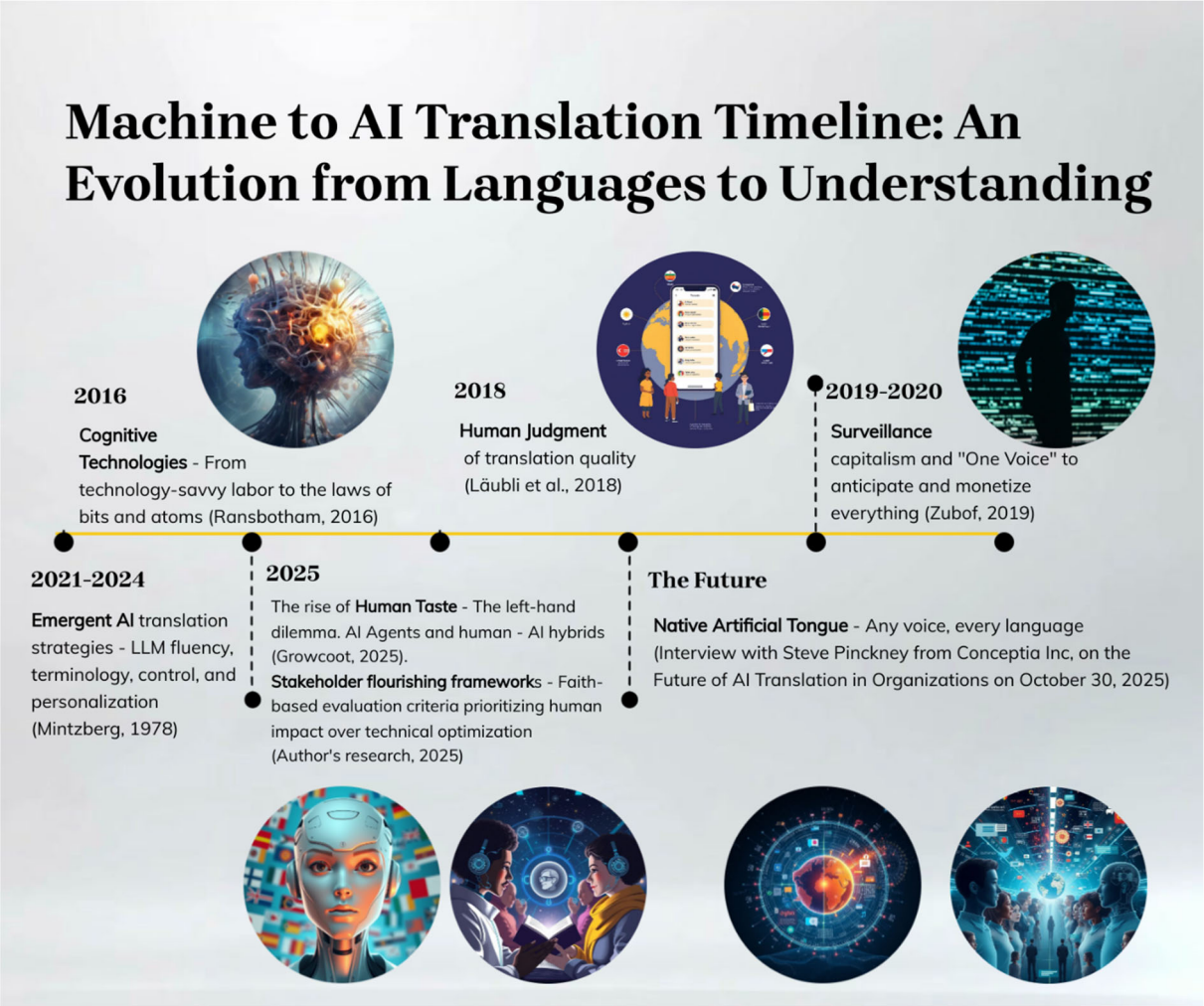
services, scholars question whose interests AI deployment benefits (Kiptanuinelsonrop, 2025; Zuboff, 2019).

Figure 1: Machine-to-AI Translation Timeline



Note. AI translation has evolved from technical optimization (2016) to the integration of human judgment (2018), concerns about surveillance capitalism (2019-2020), and is now centered on current stakeholder frameworks (Growcoot, 2025; Ransbotham, 2016). We conducted this Phase One assessment within the evolving landscape. We applied the principles of abundant life to evaluate whether translation technology benefits stakeholders or promotes institutional efficiency.

Current 2025 developments examine human-AI collaboration models where translation decisions involve both automated capabilities and human judgment (Growcoot, 2025). This trajectory points toward shared wisdom (Pentland, 2025). Human-AI hybrids will combine the speed of automated processing with human contextual judgment. Neither

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humans nor AI alone produce optimal translation outcomes. Effective translation requires human contributions of cultural understanding, contextual accuracy, and stakeholder awareness, while AI provides processing speed, consistency, and scalability. Industry leaders anticipate continued evolution. Samik Chatterjee, Head of IT Hardware and Networking Equipment research team at JP Morgan (JP Morgan, 2024), suggested that AI will "focus on local inferencing to enable low latency and personalized experiences, while also leveraging more complex audio and visual interactions such as gesture and facial recognition (Bojinov, Laakhani, & Lane, 2025)." These capabilities suggest translation technology will become increasingly personalized and multimodal. For translation implementation, researchers and practitioners address questions about quality control (Vistatec, 2024), cultural adaptation, and stakeholder access rather than pursuing full automation. Surveillance capitalism concerns prompted the deployment of alternative evaluation criteria, such as faith-based stakeholder flourishing approaches, that prioritize human impact over data extraction.

We conducted this Phase One technical assessment within this evolving landscape. AI translation capabilities now require human-centered evaluation criteria, so we applied stakeholder flourishing criteria. We used the abundant life principle as one approach to human-AI hybrid decision making (Snowden & Boone, 2007). We examined whether technology benefits stakeholders rather than only institutional efficiency. Universal language accessibility ultimately means everyone can understand everyone else in real time (Interview with Steve Pinckney from Conceptia Inc., on the Future of AI Translation in Organizations, 2025). Organizational leaders must implement frameworks prioritizing equitable access and technical capabilities to achieve this goal.

LMS Platform Architecture and Integration Constraints

Learning management platforms require different approaches to integrating third-party services. Each approach impacts the implementation of translation solutions. For example, JavaScript-based integration methods initiate automatic content detection and real-time translation but require site administrator access for implementation (Localize, 2010; MotionPoint, 2000; Weglot, 2016). DNS-level proxy configurations trigger automation, but they conflict with the standard subdomain hosting arrangements in multitenant architecture (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Thinkific, 2012). Multitenant architecture (Azouzi et al., 2018; Burns & Stalker, 1961) refers to a software instance that serves multiple customers sharing the same infrastructure and resources. This process prevents users from accessing site-level configurations.

The Thinkific (2012) platform has limited native international support, making translation and external integration a challenge rather than a platform-native feature. This limitation requires implementers to determine which platform services are compatible within the Thinkific (2012) platform constraints.

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Decision Making Under Demand Uncertainty

Technology investment decisions (Snowden & Boone, 2007) create recurring challenges in educational innovation. The "build it and they will come" approach often results in resource misallocation when anticipated demand fails to materialize (Rogers, 2003). Organizational leaders can test translation demand by using lean validation approaches. The process involves validating market demand with minimal investment and reducing resource-allocation risk. Market validation literature distinguishes between technical feasibility—whether a solution is possible—and market viability—whether sufficient demand justifies the implementation costs (Ries, 2011). The educational context adds complexity through mission-given imperatives for accessibility that may justify investment without strong revenue projections.

Stakeholder Centered AI Implementation

Zuboff (2019) documented how surveillance capitalism extracts value from users. Her research prompted questions about who benefits from AI deployment and whose interests technology benefits. For this reason, researchers sought alternative evaluation approaches prioritizing human impact over institutional efficiency.

Hogue (2025) posited that frameworks are part of the fundamental shifts helping emerging and aspiring entrepreneurs operate and create value for themselves and society, particularly when balancing AI innovation and risk. This need for decision-making frameworks applies broadly across organizational contexts, including educational institutions implementing AI translation. Clardy and Liang (2023) addressed Christian business decisions through behavioral economics, examining innovation and human flourishing through entrepreneurial stewardship principles. They defined entrepreneurship as a venture of faith and profitable to humankind. They argued that every decision requires stakeholder consideration. Faith-based approaches acknowledge the tensions between technological advancements and human values.

Christian theology grounds human flourishing in the cultural mandate. Humanity's calling includes co-ruling and co-loving what God created. Rhodes et al. (2018) explained, "because people are made in the image of a creating and creative God, we are called to (1) preserve and protect the natural world and (2) create culture and economic flourishing by stewarding the natural world" (p. 35). This cultural mandate provides a theological foundation for economic lives. God wants and requires people to work to bring out the world's unexploited potential as part of their vocation.

The cultural mandate applies to technology stewardship decisions. When organizational leaders implement AI translation, they either fulfill the mandate by serving human flourishing or violate it by serving only institutional efficiency. The Holy Spirit creates connectivity and harmony within communities, which education

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and communication technology can serve. Kiptanuinelsonrop (2025) noted that "AI is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. It reflects its makers. For Christians, the challenge is to shape this technology with wisdom, compassion, and reverence for God's design."

John 10:10 principles of abundant life, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly, provides practical decision criteria for technology evaluation. This principle translates to implementation questions: Does this technology primarily benefit institutional efficiency? The Abundant Life Framework prioritizes stakeholder outcomes over operational automation, examining how solutions affect students seeking access, educators maintaining quality, and administrators managing resources.

Blanchard and Hodges (2005) described ego-driven decision making as "edging God out," resulting in fear-based rather than stewardship-based choices. Leaders who make technology decisions from fear of falling behind or pride in automation capabilities make different choices than those who prioritize stakeholder flourishing. Belcic and Stryker (2025) cautioned organizations against FOMO-driven AI adoption, where leaders adopt technology (Selten & Klievink, 2024) because competitors are implementing it rather than because stakeholders need it. Abundant life principles counter this pressure by focusing evaluation on stakeholder flourishing rather than industry trends or competitive anxiety.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic relationships between Christian values and organizational decision-making environments. We trace how Christian worldview principles (R1) generate stakeholder-centered evaluation criteria that reveal implementation barriers. We observe how AI implementation challenges drive continued research (R2), while the efficiency-focused approaches face accessibility constraints (B2). We use these interconnected feedback loops as the theoretical foundation for stakeholder flourishing evaluation.

Faith and Innovation

Faith Begins With Christ

Christians center their faith on belief in Jesus Christ and adherence to His promises. In this research, we use faith-based principles to examine AI translation technologies. The scriptures are a living guide through John 3:16 that describes our relationship with Christ and the covenant between the visible and invisible realms. Through our faith, we affirm this covenant, calling us to embrace change rather than resist it. The developers continue advancing AI capabilities that alter communication, perception, and human interaction in ways we cannot fully anticipate or control. This rapid technological evolution creates uncertainty for entrepreneurs seeking to build sustainable businesses.

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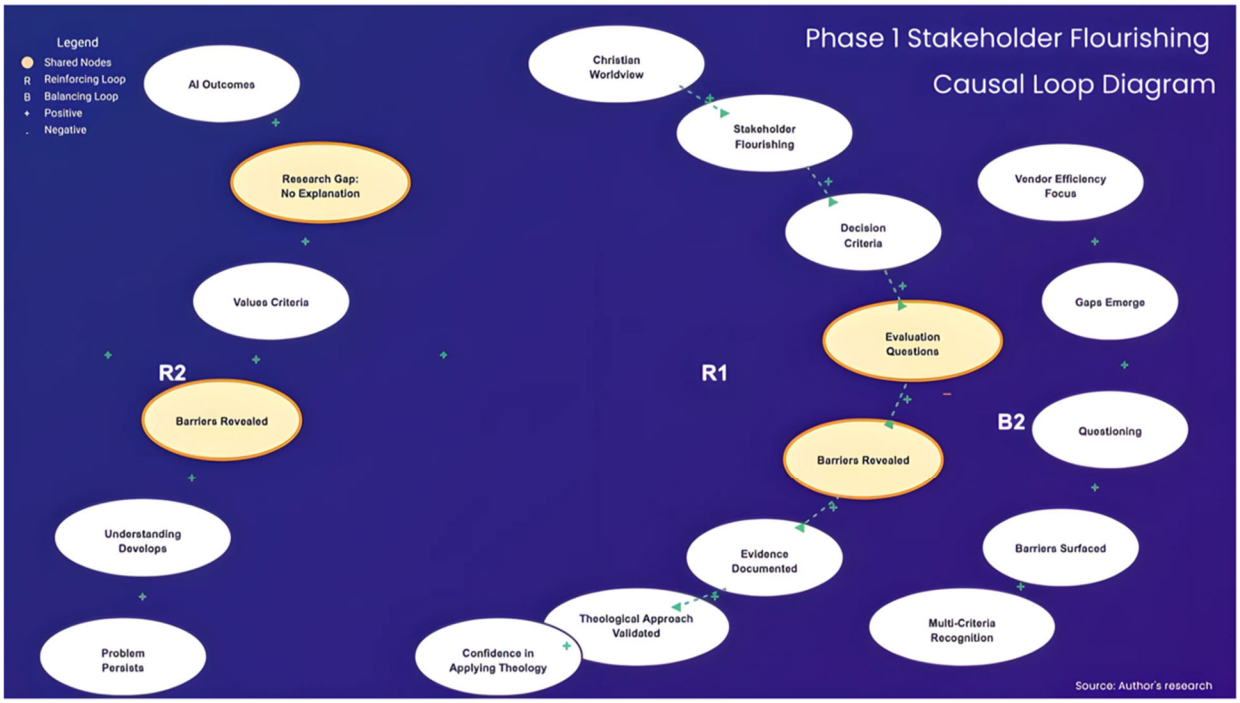
Figure 2: Phase 1 Stakeholder Flourishing



Note. In Loop R1, we observe how applying Christian worldview principles prioritizes stakeholder flourishing. Using the system's language, our observations confirm that the more the Christian worldview informs decisions, the more stakeholder flourishing is prioritized. The more stakeholder flourishing is prioritized, the more decision criteria emerge. The more decision criteria emerge, the more evaluation questions are developed. The more evaluation questions are developed, the more barriers are revealed. The more barriers are revealed, the more evidence is documented. The more evidence is documented, the more the theological approach is validated as practical. In loop R2, we observe how AI implementation problems persist throughout the research cycle. In loop B2, we observe how leaders encounter accessibility constraints when pursuing efficiency-only approaches. This Phase One assessment applied these principles to the

Entrepreneurs already faced significant challenges launching and sustaining businesses. When language barriers compound these difficulties, the challenges intensify. Neubert (2013) noted that supporting a family through entrepreneurship creates overwhelming pressure. Believers in Jesus Christ understand that God is the source of provision. Starting a business, growing it, building a legacy, and sharing it requires faith at every stage. Stakeholder flourishing becomes vital to entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship education. When we prioritize removing barriers to access, we enable global participation in entrepreneurship development.

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Pride and Fear

Ego-driven responses manifest when individuals face disruption. Pride and fear shape reactions to technological advancements, including the implementation of AI. According to Blanchard and Hodges (2005), "ego problems" occur when individuals "edge God out" as their source of worth, security, and primary audience, creating two distinct patterns of dysfunction. John 3:16 is a passage of written guidance that helps leaders respond to change, submitting circumstances to God's authority rather than reacting out of ego. The current discourse around AI reflects both advocacy and opposition, often rooted in concerns about economic security and livelihood (Barnhart, 2023; Locke, 2024).

The Duality

Christian theology and scientific advancement create ongoing tensions in practice. The Christian Mandate to " make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) requires both innovation and resources, raising questions about exploration boundaries and application ethics (Barnhart & Turner, 2024; Locke, 2024). Responses to these questions vary across Christian communities. Kiptanuinelsonrop (2025) stated, "Artificial intelligence is not inherently good or evil. It reflects its makers. For Christians, the challenge is to shape this technology with the wisdom, compassion, and reverence for God's design." This perspective frames technology as a tool rather than an autonomous force, placing responsibility on users to align implementation with biblical principles.

Methodology

Research Design

In this Phase One study, we employed a systematic technical feasibility assessment examining translation technologies for the Regent Center for Entrepreneurship Virtual Business Development Center (RCE). The platform operates on Thinkific's (2012) LMS. We evaluated expansion capabilities beyond English-speaking markets. The assessment prioritized identifying technically viable solutions while applying stakeholder flourishing criteria to implementation decisions.

The research evaluated nine translation vendors across three solution categories: professional translation services, DIY/manual translation solutions, and browser extension solutions. The evaluation criteria incorporated both traditional technical criteria and stakeholder-centered considerations derived from the principles of an abundant life, as outlined in John 10:10.

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Solution Categories

Professional translation services included vendors offering a comprehensive platform integration through JavaScript implementation or DNS-level proxy configurations. The sales representatives promised that these solutions would automate real-time content translation with minimal ongoing maintenance. We evaluated three vendors: Weglot (2016), Localize (2010), and MotionPoint (2000). Students using browser extension solutions control translation activation. These solutions have minimal institutional infrastructure requirements. We evaluated accessibility, user experience, and implementation simplicity through hands-on testing with course materials.

Evaluation Criteria

We assessed each solution category using dual evaluation criteria. We used technical feasibility criteria to evaluate implementation requirements and performance characteristics. For stakeholder flourishing criteria, we measured the impact on students, educators, and administrators. Technical feasibility criteria included the following:

- Platform compatibility with Thinkific (2012) infrastructure
- Implementation requirements (site administrative access, DNS configuration, JavaScript integration)
- Set-up time and complexity translation accuracy for entrepreneurship terminology performance with embedded multimedia content
- Cost structures (subscription fees, per-wording price, and implementation costs)
- Ongoing maintenance requirements

Stakeholder flourishing criteria derived from abundant life principles, included the following:

- Student accessibility (bandwidth requirements, device compatibility, user control)
- Educator workflow preservation (time and investment, quality controller mechanism, content management)
- Administrative feasibility (infrastructure requirements, resource investment, reversibility)
- Equitable access considerations (zero-cost options, infrastructure-light solutions)

For each solution, the stakeholder flourishing principles asked: Does this technology primarily benefit stakeholders, or does it primarily benefit institutional efficiency? This question informed the weight of technical capabilities in the final recommendations.

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Data Collection Methods

We conducted professional consultations through vendor sales meetings. MotionPoint (2000) has enterprise-level translation capabilities, implementation requirements, and pricing structures. Likewise, Localize (2010) has JavaScript-based integration methods and automation features.

Technical support staff provided details on the implementation requirements that were not available in the marketing materials. Weglot (2016) supports correspondence-addressed DNS configuration requirements and JavaScript integration specifications. Thinkific (2012) supports correspondence-confirmed platform limitations regarding site administrator access and third-party integration capabilities.

We used beta testing protocols to include RCE course content across all solution categories. Testing measured translation time, quality assessment for entrepreneurship terminology, multimedia content handling, and user experience factors. Performance testing focused on identifying implementation blockers, which included technical requirements that prevented deployment, regardless of other favorable characteristics.

Comparative Analysis

We compared the trade-offs between automation capabilities and implementation barriers. Our analysis prioritized solutions that enable immediate student access over those requiring extended infrastructure development timelines. Students seeking translated content only benefit from solutions we can actually deploy.

Analysis Approach

We analyzed how traditional efficiency-focused evaluation would rank solutions compared with how stakeholder flourishing criteria would influence rankings. For each solution category, we documented the following:

- Technical capabilities and limitations
- Implementation blockers
- Stakeholder impact for students, educators, and administrators
- Alignment with the abundant life principles, prioritizing access over automation

Applying this dual evaluation approach revealed where stakeholder flourishing material led to different implementation recommendations than would pure technical optimization.

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Findings

Professional Translation Services

We tested professional translation services through beta evaluation. These services have comprehensive translation capabilities with minimum ongoing maintenance. Weglot (2016) and Localize (2010) have superior automation features, including automatic content detection, real-time translation across multiple languages, and translation of end-user interface elements. The set-up process for both services takes approximately 15 minutes, including site administrator access.

Implementation Barriers. All professional translation services require site administrator access for JavaScript integration or DNS-level proxy configuration. Thinkific (2012) operates using multitenant architecture—one software instance serving multiple schools that share infrastructure (Azouzi et al., 2018). This shared hosting arrangement prevents users from accessing site administrator controls or modifying DNS configurations. We could not deploy JavaScript integration or DNS-based translation services due to these platform constraints.

Cost Structure. Professional translation services have monthly subscription fees ranging from $20 to $40, with per-language pricing tiers. MotionPoint's (2000) enterprise-level solutions start at significantly higher price points with customer implementation support. These price points represent ongoing expenses.

Stakeholder Impact Analysis.

- Students would experience seamless translations across all course elements without additional actions.
- Educators would maintain the current workflow without translation management responsibilities.
- Administrators cannot overlook platform access limitations despite a favorable cost-benefit analysis.

Abundant Life Framework Application. Vendors design professional translation services for institutional efficiency with minimal maintenance requirements once implemented. However, we were unable to deploy them due to platform barriers. The site administrator's access blocker prevented stakeholders from benefiting from these capabilities. We used the principles of abundance to prioritize deployable solutions over technically superior but unimplementable options.

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DIY/Manual Translation Solutions

We tested manual translation options using professional tools. Time requirements varied based on content type and desired quality levels. We evaluated both document-level translation for static materials and comprehensive lesson translation, including interactive elements.

Document Translation Performance. We tested DeepL (2021) with a 12-page PDF document with embedded graphics and charts. The processing time was 25 seconds, demonstrating efficiency for downloadable course materials. Entrepreneurship terminology is translated with contextual accuracy across business concepts.

Comprehensive Lesson Translation. We found that translating complete lessons, including interactive elements, embedded videos (Microsoft, 2018; Microsoft, 2024; Tolle, 2012), and discussion prompts, required 3 to 6 hours per lesson, depending on the multimedia content complexity. We spent time on translation generation, quality review, terminology consistency, and content reformatting.

Cost Structure. Manual solutions have zero subscription costs, though labor investment is significant. DeepL (2021) has free tiers for document translation, along with premium features at lower prices than professional translation services (Forbes Talks, 2025). Organizational leaders choosing manual solutions trade subscription fees for staff time investment.

Stakeholder Impact Analysis.

- Students access professionally translated content after manual translation completion with high-quality control.
- Educators manage translation workflows, quality review processes, and content updates across multiple language versions.
- Administrators could implement immediately without making infrastructure changes, but required a budget allocation for translation labor costs.

Abundant Life Framework Application. We achieved high-quality translations that could benefit students' comprehension needs. However, the requirement of 3 to 6 hours per lesson prevented rapid course expansion and significantly increased educators' workload. We applied the principles of abundant life to evaluate this trade-off. Does this time investment benefit stakeholder flourishing or create unsustainable workloads for educators? We identified document-level translation for downloadable resources as a viable middle approach. Students would access translated PDFs and handouts while interactive lessons remained in English. This approach preserves educator workflow while expanding student access to key materials.

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Browser Extension Solutions

We could implement Browser Extension Solutions immediately without institutional infrastructure changes. These extensions differ from professional translation services and manual approaches because students control when translation is activated. We tested multiple Browser Extension Solutions, including built-in features in Chrome, Firefox, and Safari, as well as Google Translate (n.d.) extensions.

Implementation Simplicity. Students activate browser translation extensions through Chrome, Firefox, Safari, or use third-party extensions such as Google Translate (n.d.). They can access translations immediately without institutional involvement, administrator permissions, or subscription costs. The browser prompts are simple to follow and are helpful when enabling features and extensions. Students with browser skills can activate translation features immediately.

Translation Quality. We tested browser translation functionality with course content. Entrepreneurship terminology accuracy varied by language pair. Entrepreneurial concepts were conveyed with sufficient clarity to meet learning objectives, although nuanced business terminologies occasionally required student interpretation.

Performance Characteristics. Translation occurs in the student's browser on their device. Speeds depend on the student's device capabilities and internet connectivity (Maphosa & Maphosa, 2023; Shanahan & Bahia, 2025). Students control when translations activate, which context to translate, and can toggle between original English and translation versions. This student-controlled approach allows learners to verify comprehension by comparing the original and translated text.

Stakeholder Impact Analysis.

- Students gain immediate access to course content and preferred languages with complete control over translation activation and can validate interest in translated content before institutional investment.
- Educators maintain current workflows without translation management and retain English language course materials without version control challenges.
- Administrators can implement immediately at zero cost, enable demand validation before infrastructure investment, and maintain course access reversibility.

Abundant Life Framework Application. Students using browser extension solutions can control activation and evaluation on their own terms. This approach benefits stakeholder flourishing by removing barriers to access while preserving institutional resources for deployment after demand validation. The zero-cost, immediate implementation enabled students to access course content immediately rather than

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waiting for professional translation services to become technically feasible. Abundant life principles led to recommending solutions that serve current student needs rather than waiting for ideal future automation capabilities.

Comparative Analysis Summary

Professional translation services have superior technical optimization criteria; however, platform constraints blocked deployment (see Tables 1-3). We found that DIY/manual translations solutions produced high-quality content; however, the 3 to 6 hours required per lesson created an unsustainable increase in educator workload. Browser extension solutions are less technically sophisticated, but students could access content immediately at zero cost while we validate demand. Using the principles of abundant life, we prioritized deployable solutions that serve current stakeholder needs over unimplementable technical capabilities. We chose browser extension solutions for immediate implementation, despite its lower technical sophistication compared to professional translation services.

Table 1: Translation Technical Feasibility

Criteria	Professional Translation Services	DIY/Manual Translation Solutions	Browser Extension Solutions
Platform capability	Blocked (site admin. access)	Compatible	Compatible
Set-up time	15 minutes (if feasible)	Immediate	Immediate
Translation time	Real-time automation	25 seconds to 6 hours per lesson	Real-time student side
Ongoing maintenance	Minimal	Significant per update	None

Table 2: Cost Structure

Criteria	Professional Translation Services	DIY/Manual Translation Solutions	Browser Extension Solutions
Implementation	$0 Set-up	$0 Set-up	$0 Set-up
Ongoing	$20-$40/month	Labor hours	$0

Table 3: Stakeholder Flourishing

Criteria	Professional Translation Services	DIY/Manual Translation Solutions	Browser Extension Solutions
Student access	Would be seamless (if deployable)	Delayed Pending Translation Completion	None
Feasibility	Blocked by platform limitations	Intensive	Feasible
Demand validation	Requires pre-investment	Requires Investment	Enable Validation

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Criteria	Professional Translation Services	DIY/Manual Translation Solutions	Browser Extension Solutions
Reversibility	Subscription-based	Content Committed	Instant

Discussion

Technical Feasibility Findings

We confirmed through Phase One assessment that translation technologies exist across multiple solution categories with varying technical capabilities. Professional translation services demonstrated superior features but encountered deployment blockers related to platform architecture constraints (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Manual solutions proved technically feasible but required significant time investments per lesson. Browser extensions offered immediate deployment without infrastructure dependencies.

The most significant finding relates to the technical sophistication and its lack of correlation with implementation feasibility. The most technically advanced solutions, professional translation services, could not be deployed through the LMS. On the other hand, the most straightforward solution technically—browser extensions—enabled immediate implementation. This revelation explains how platform constraints can eliminate technically superior options regardless of feature capabilities.

We identified that site administrator access is the critical blocker for professional translation services. Thinkific's (2012) multitenant architecture and limited administrator access prevent JavaScript integration and DNS proxy configuration. This platform constraint eliminated an entire solution category from consideration, despite a favorable cost-benefit analysis and superior automation features (Localize, 2010; MotionPoint, 2000; Weglot, 2016).

Stakeholder Flourishing Analysis

We applied abundant life principles to translation evaluation and ranked solutions differently than efficiency-focused evaluation would. Traditional efficiency evaluation prioritizes professional translation services for comprehensive automation capabilities and minimal ongoing maintenance. However, we used stakeholder flourishing criteria (Barnhart 2023; Barnhart & Turner, 2024) to prioritize browser extensions despite lower technical sophistication.

The decisive factor was the timing of student access. Professional translation services would require waiting for the LMS changes or migrating to a different LMS infrastructure. Using browser extensions, students accessed content immediately,

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serving current stakeholder needs rather than optimizing for future institutional efficiency.

Using abundant life principles, we asked questions that technical criteria did not address:

- Does requiring students to wait for professional translation infrastructure benefit their educational access needs or institutional automation preferences?
- Does placing a 3- to 6-hour workflow burden on educators per lesson affect their capacity to maintain quality instruction?
- Does zero-cost validation protect institutional resources while enabling student access?

We prioritized solutions that removed barriers (Acilar, 2011; Amjad et al., 2024; Autio et al., 2025; Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, 2024; Mpedi et al., 2025; Pierce & Cleary, 2024; Raihan et al., 2024; Smith, 2025; Vesna et al., 2025) to student access, preserved educated workflow capacity, and enabled demand validation before resource commitment. Our analysis uncovered tensions between institutional efficiency optimization and stakeholder flourishing. Professional translation services have comprehensive automation capabilities. Once implemented, maintenance requirements are minimal. However, we could not implement them without overcoming the platform barriers. Prioritizing browser extensions provided students with immediate access, despite the solution's lack of institutional automation sophistication.

Phase One Limitations

We examined technical feasibility without validating student demand. We confirmed that implementation is possible, and we must now determine whether students actually need these capabilities. Technical feasibility does not confirm market viability. We analyzed one LMS platform. Thinkific's (2012) site administrator access constraints may not apply to other LMS platforms. Institutions using Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle may encounter different technical barriers and have access to different solution categories.

We tested entrepreneurship education content; translation challenges may vary by discipline. Technical terminology, cultural context requirements, and multimedia content characteristics may vary by subject matter. The translation feasibility for entrepreneurship courses may differ from that for science, humanities, or professional certification courses.

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Our beta testing scope examined nine vendors but did not exhaustively evaluate all available translation technologies. Additional solutions may exist with different technical specifications or implementation requirements, which could alter the feasibility rankings.

Implications for Practice

Our phased implementation approach applies to cases beyond this specific one. Educational leaders facing similar translation decisions can use this evaluation criteria to assess technical feasibility before investing in infrastructure or professional translation services. The dual criteria approach, which combines technical feasibility with stakeholder flourishing analysis, helps uncover implementation options that a pure efficiency evaluation would overlook.

Zero-cost validation via browser extensions helped us choose a risk mitigation strategy. Institutional leaders can enable student access immediately while collecting usage data, student feedback, and demand indicators. This evidence allows us to make an informed decision on whether investing in professional translation services is justified in Phase Two.

Applying the Abundant Life Framework, we demonstrated how faith-based principles translate to practical implementation decisions. Asking, does this technology benefit stakeholders, or does our institutional efficiency produce different vendor rankings than asking which solution offers the best automation? This framework applies to AI implementation decisions beyond translation, including educational technology, administrative systems, and student services, all of which benefit from stakeholder-centered evaluation criteria.

We identified implementation blockers that prevented waste of vendor evaluation time. Our discovery of site administrator access requirements, following extensive vendor demonstrations and cost negotiations, would have wasted institutional resources. Organizational leaders should identify implementation blockers before evaluating vendors. This approach helps leaders to assess deployable solutions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Phase One Complete Summary

During the Phase One technical feasibility assessment, we confirmed that translation technologies exist across multiple solution categories with varying implementation requirements. Professional translation services have comprehensive capabilities but encounter platform-specific deployment barriers. DIY/manual translation solutions

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often require significant time investment for quality control. Browser extensions have immediate student access without infrastructure dependencies.

We established technical feasibility from multiple approaches. Implementation pathways have been identified for solutions compatible with current platform constraints. Deployment blockers have been identified with solutions that require infrastructure changes exceeding current institutional capabilities.

Strategic Recommendations

Based on technical feasibility and stakeholder flourishing principles, we recommend a three-option phased implementation strategy. Option 1 enables immediate student access with zero calls while validating demand. Options 2 and 3 depend on Phase Two validation results confirming sustained student need, which justifies additional investment.

Option 1: Immediate Implementation—Browser Translation Guidance. We provide students with guidance on browser extensions to access course content in their preferred languages immediately. Students use built-in browser features or free third-party extensions without institutional infrastructure or subscription costs. They control translation timing and content selection. We can gather usage data and student feedback during Phase Two demand validation.

Implementation steps follow:

- Create browser translation set-up instructions for Chrome, Firefox, and Safari
- Distribute guidance through course announcements and welcome materials
- Monitor student use through voluntary feedback and completion rate analysis
- Collect data on language preferences, translation quality perception, and accessibility barriers

We recommend Option 1 because it prioritizes student access over institutional automation. Students seeking translated content gain immediate access rather than waiting for professional translation services to become technically feasible. The zero-cost, immediate implementation approach aligns with abundant life principles and serves current stakeholder needs.

Option 2: Phased Enhancement—Document Translation. We add DIY/manual translation solutions, such as DeepL (2021), for downloadable resources after Phase Two validated demand and gather student feedback. DeepL (2021) systems produce higher-quality results for static content while students continue using a browser extension for interactive lessons (Forbes Talks, 2025). This approach balances quality

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improvements with manageable time investment, avoiding the unsustainable educator workload of complete lesson translation. Implementation triggers follow:

- You can confirm sustained student demand across specific language populations in Phase Two.
- You receive feedback from the browser extension indicating concerns about document translation quality.
- You discover that students are prioritizing specific downloadable resources.

Option 2 is for decision makers who want to balance quality enhancement with resource investment. Document translation requires limited time investment (25 seconds per PDF through (DeepL, 2021; Forbes Talks, 2025) compared to manual, comprehensive lesson translation (3 to 6 hours per lesson). Decision makers can phase out implementation based on student priorities identified through Phase Two research.

Option 3: Future Considerations—Professional Translation Services. We recommended deferring professional translation services until infrastructure investment and sustained demand validation are in place. Translation services, such as Weglot (2016), MotionPoint (2000), and Localize (2010), require custom domain set-up or site administrator access, as well as monthly subscription costs. Implementing these services requires infrastructure updates before deployment.

Implementation Prerequisites

- Phase Two confirms sustained multiyear demand, justifying ongoing subscription costs
- Translation platform migration to the LMS supporting site administrative access
- Thinkific (2012) platform updates enabling third-party JavaScript integration
- Budget allocation for $240 to $480 annual subscription costs

This option is for decision makers who can implement infrastructure changes before deployment. Using the abundant life principles, decision makers can defer this investment until Phases Two and Three confirm that student demand justifies modifying the infrastructure and the ongoing costs. This approach benefits stakeholder flourishing by preventing premature resource commitment to unvalidated needs.

Next Steps

Phase Two student demand validation must occur before finalizing implementation recommendations. Technical feasibility alone does not confirm that students need or will use translation capabilities. Phase Two research requires the following:

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- Survey development measuring translation needs across the current student population
- Language preference identification for target markets
- An analysis of whether English proficiency prevents course completion
- Usage data collection from the Option 1 browser extension implementation

The final feasibility determination for Phase Three will integrate the technical findings from Phase One with the demand validation from Phase Two. Integrating both findings and validation helps decision makers determine whether translation expansion benefits the institutional mission and fosters stakeholder flourishing based on actual student needs rather than assumed demand.

The recommendation is to implement Option 1 immediately while conducting Phase Two research. This process enables students to access information now, rather than delaying until demand validation is complete. Students will benefit from the available capabilities while the institution collects evidence to inform future investment decisions.

Contribution to Literature

We illustrated how stakeholder flourishing principles can be applied to technical AI implementation decisions. The abundant life principle has practical decision criteria that help decision makers rank vendors on more than just efficiency optimization. Decision makers can use this methodology beyond translation to other AI implementation contexts, where institutions must balance technical capabilities with stakeholder impact.

In this study, we demonstrated how faith-based principles translate into replicable evaluation criteria accessible to both religious and secular organizations. Asking does this technology benefit stakeholders or institutional efficiency yields stakeholder-centered decisions regardless of the philosophical foundation that motivates the question. For example, secular organizations can use the evaluative question without adopting Christian theology and still arrive at stakeholder-centered implementation decisions.

The Phase One technical feasibility assessment provides a foundation for a staged implementation, thereby reducing risk. Educational institutions can replicate this evaluation approach before investing in infrastructure or professional translation services. We suggest implementation options that the efficiency-first evaluations overlook.

We documented how platform constraints eliminate solution categories regardless of technical sophistication. Professional translation services have superior features and

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favorable costs. We were unable to deploy them because they required site administrator access, which the LMS did not provide. Decision makers must evaluate LMS infrastructure compatibility and vendor compatibility.

In this Phase One study, we established the technical feasibility of implementing AI translation. Market viability remains unconfirmed pending Phase Two demand validation. We demonstrated how the phase research approach can assist leaders in making informed decisions under demand uncertainty by separating technical assessment from demand validation, rather than attempting to determine comprehensive feasibility before acting.

AI translation capabilities will continue evolving in ways we cannot fully anticipate (Goorha & Iyengar, 2020; Loucks et al., 2024; PWC, 2025a; PWC, 2025b). The shared wisdom approach combining human judgment with AI capabilities (Burnham, 2025; Creative Intelligence, 2025; Middlebury Institute of International Studies, 2024a; Middlebury Institute of International Studies, 2024b; Middlebury Institute of International Studies, 2024c; Weill et al., 2024) is one path forward. How can entrepreneurship educators and administrators ensure they are ready for the AI transitions yet to come, such as AI agents? This question requires ongoing evaluation using stakeholder flourishing criteria rather than efficiency metrics alone. Applying faith-based frameworks in any organization helps decision makers navigate this uncertainty while keeping human flourishing central.

About the Author

Dr. Autonnette McLaughlin holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with a concentration in strategic foresight from Regent University and is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Foresight at the University of Houston. She is an executive business mentor with over 20 years of experience partnering with Fortune 500 companies, small businesses, and religious organizations. Her research interests include strategic foresight, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and experiential learning.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:
LeadOn@Autonnette.com

Dr. John Mulford joined Regent University as a founding faculty member in the Business School in 1982. In addition to serving as a professor, he has served as dean of the Business School, chief financial officer and chief investment officer of Regent University, and founder and director of Regent Center for Entrepreneurship. Through the Center, he has pursued his passion for helping entrepreneurs start and grow businesses in dozens of countries, most notably by creating a model for Business Development Centers that has been licensed in nine countries. He has been active in the Christian business movement, serving on the boards of several key organizations,

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including Nehemiah Project International Ministries, Fellowship of Companies for Christ International, and C12. Prior to Regent, Dr. Mulford conducted policy research at the Rand Corporation and served as vice president and senior economist at First Interstate Bank of California. He earned the B.S. in Engineering, Magna Cum Laude, from Brown University, and the Ph.D. in Regional Economics from Cornell University, where he was a National Science Foundation Fellow.

Jason Benedict serves as a Strategist for the Regent Center for Entrepreneurship. He and his wife, Kimberly, began working cross-culturally in 1994, and he has had the pleasure of equipping leaders around the world, leading field teams, starting businesses, and developing innovative ways to share the Good News with the nations. Jason is a contributing editor of Momentum Magazine and is the author of Eden Inc.

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Nehemiah as a Trauma-Informed Servant Leader

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Biblical Perspectives

Abstract

Collective crises leave deep emotional, relational, and spiritual wounds within communities, requiring leaders who can respond with humility, courage, and discernment. This article examines Nehemiah as a trauma-informed servant leader whose actions foster human flourishing in the aftermath of collective trauma. Through a hybrid approach that integrates biblical exegesis, servant leadership scholarship, and a trauma-informed leadership framework, this paper argues that Nehemiah embodies core principles of trauma-informed leadership long before the development of modern psychological language. Using the five domains of safety, physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural, the analysis demonstrates how Nehemiah simultaneously restored structures, relationships, identity, and worship. His leadership reflects a holistic vision of flourishing (*shalom*) grounded in Scripture and fulfilled in Christ. This study contributes to faith-integrated leadership scholarship by offering a restorative and Christ-centered paradigm for leaders navigating wounded, fragmented, or crisis-shaped communities today.

Keywords: trauma, servant leadership, shalom, Nehemiah, flourishing

The world is becoming increasingly familiar with collective crises—pandemics, natural disasters, war, economic instability, and rising levels of burnout and disconnection. Scholars in trauma studies noted that collective trauma reshapes not only individuals but entire communities, altering their sense of identity, safety, and future (Herman, 1997; Hirschberger, 2018). Modern organizational psychology also affirms that environments marked by instability, fear, and loss require leaders who understand the impact of trauma and can cultivate conditions for recovery and flourishing (Lloyd, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014).

However, long before trauma-informed leadership theory emerged, Scripture offered profound models of leadership rooted in compassion, justice, moral courage, and

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restoration. Nehemiah, an exilic Jew serving as cupbearer to the Persian king, exemplifies such leadership. His story unfolds in a community still reeling from the Babylonian exile—a community experiencing starvation, social fracture, fear, and loss of national identity. Into this wounded context, Nehemiah leads with a posture that resonates deeply with modern trauma-informed principles and values of servant leadership.

This article explores Nehemiah through three interconnected lenses: (a) biblical exegesis of key passages, (b) servant leadership theory, and (c) a trauma-informed leadership framework (Lloyd, 2024). These lenses together reveal Nehemiah not only as an administrator or strategist but as a trauma-informed servant leader who cultivates human flourishing through safety, empowerment, justice, and spiritual renewal.

The Postexilic Setting as Collective Trauma

The opening chapter of Nehemiah sets the emotional tone of the narrative. Hanani, returning from Judah, reports that "those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace" and that "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Neh. 1:3). All biblical citations use the text of the New International Version [NIV] (2024). The term disgrace (*ḥerpâ*) conveys shame, humiliation, and social vulnerability. Beyond physical ruin, Jerusalem's people are psychologically destabilized, without protection, dignity, or a sense of communal belonging.

Biblical scholars classified the exile and its aftermath as a form of collective trauma, a crisis that impacts identity, memory, spirituality, and community cohesion (Brueggemann, 1997). Collective trauma erodes trust, intensifies fear, and disrupts cultural identity. The remnant in Jerusalem experienced economic exploitation (Neh. 5), external threats (Neh. 4), and spiritual confusion (Neh. 8). Their trauma was not merely personal; it was social, historical, and cultural.

Nehemiah steps into this context with acute emotional awareness, spiritual discernment, and moral courage. His first recorded response, lamenting, signals his attunement to the people's pain.

Lament as Regulating Distress: Nehemiah 1 and the Beginning of Servant Leadership

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept" (Neh. 1:4). This verse captures Nehemiah's initial reaction to trauma. He fully feels the weight of the people's suffering. He does not detach, excuse, or minimize his actions. Instead, his lament (*bākâ*) reflects deep empathy and attuned leadership.

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Trauma scholars emphasize that healing begins with safe acknowledgment of pain (Herman, 1997; van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma-informed leadership frameworks also identify regulating distress as foundational: leaders create space for honest emotions, establish a calm presence, and center decisions on care rather than urgency (Lloyd, 2024).

Nehemiah models this principle. His fasting, mourning, and extended prayer reveal not only emotional intelligence but spiritual dependence. His prayer integrates confession (vv. 6–7), remembrance of God's promises (vv. 8–9), and a plea for favor (v. 11). These movements reflect both attunement and theological grounding.

Servant leadership scholars (Greenleaf, 2002; Spears, 2010) emphasized that true servant leaders start with empathy, humility, and active listening. Nehemiah embodies these virtues by first taking the suffering of others into his own heart. His lament becomes the theological and emotional foundation of everything he does next.

Empowerment and Shared Responsibility: Nehemiah 2–6

After prayerful discernment, Nehemiah receives permission from King Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem. His first act upon arrival is a quiet nighttime inspection of the walls (Neh. 2:11–15). This sequence demonstrates careful assessment rather than impulsive action. He engages in what leadership scholars call sensemaking, a crucial step in trauma-informed environments where reality must be understood accurately (Weick, 1995).

Casting Vision and Inviting Participation

Nehemiah then gathers the leaders and communicates both the problem and God's provision: "You see the trouble we are in… Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem" (Neh. 2:17). This invitation embodies empowerment, not authoritarian command. The Hebrew verb "let us rebuild" (*wənibneh*) communicates shared responsibility. Trauma-informed practice prioritizes agency because trauma often strips individuals of control (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Similarly, servant leadership elevates the growth and dignity of those being led (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Distributed Leadership in Nehemiah 3

Nehemiah 3 details the collaborative labor of priests, families, rulers, and tradesmen. This long list is not extraneous; it reflects the social rebuilding of a traumatized people. Rebuilding the wall becomes a ritual of restoring agency, strengthening relationships, and reestablishing identity. Within Lloyd's (2024) trauma-informed leadership framework, this aligns with the attributes of relational capacity and authenticity, where leaders cultivate relationships built on trust, transparency, and mutual responsibility.

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Resilience Under Opposition (Nehemiah 4–6)

When Sanballat, Tobiah, and others ridicule and threaten Jerusalem, Nehemiah demonstrates remarkable resilience. He prays (4:4), posts guards (4:13), motivates the people spiritually (4:14), and adapts strategy by having workers hold weapons in one hand and tools in the other (4:17). This mixture of spiritual dependence and pragmatic wisdom reflects both resilience and adaptive leadership.

Nehemiah's prayer, "Now strengthen my hands" (Neh. 6:9), expresses the core of resilient leadership, drawing strength from God when external and internal pressures intensify.

Servant leadership theory frequently emphasizes hope**,** persuasion over coercion, and stewardship, all of which are evident in Nehemiah's leadership under opposition (Eva et al., 2019). His authority flows from his moral character, not his positional power.

Moral Safety and Confronting Injustice: Nehemiah 5

One of the most trauma-informed actions Nehemiah takes occurs in Chapter 5, when he confronts internal injustice. Wealthy Jews were exploiting their poorer neighbors through interest, forced pledges, and even enslavement. Nehemiah becomes "very angry" (5:6), but instead of reacting impulsively, he "pondered them in [his] mind" and then rebuked the nobles (5:7).

His response reveals several trauma-informed and servant leadership characteristics:

- **moral courage**: addressing injustice even among elites
- **stewardship**: using authority for the common good
- **integrity**: refusing personal benefits (5:14–19)
- **advocacy**: protecting the vulnerable

Within the trauma-informed leadership framework, this is moral safety, the assurance that leaders will act ethically and protect justice. Trauma flourishes where injustice persists; healing requires a restored moral environment (Lloyd, 2024). Biblical flourishing (*shalom*) is inseparable from justice (Isaiah 58; Amos 5). Nehemiah embodies this prophetic dimension of leadership.

Restoring Identity, Worship, and Emotional Healing: Nehemiah 8–10

With the wall complete, Nehemiah turns to the deeper work of identity restoration. Ezra reads the Law to the gathered people, who weep upon hearing it (Neh. 8:9). Their tears reflect conviction, memory, and rediscovered identity. Nehemiah responds with compassion: "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10). This moment represents a trauma-informed practice of emotional attunement and reframing.

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Nehemiah does not dismiss their pain, but he guides them into celebration, feasting, and worship.

The communal confession in Chapter 9 and the covenant renewal in Chapter 10 represent a profound spiritual reorientation. Trauma disorients identity; worship reorients it. Servant leadership emphasizes the spiritual growth of followers; Nehemiah facilitates corporate transformation. This time of restoration aligns with the trauma-informed leadership behavior of practicing emotional healing, creating environments where people restore meaning, coherence, and hope.

The Five Domains of Safety Through a Trauma-Informed Leadership Framework

Lloyd's (2024) trauma-informed leadership framework identifies five domains of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—as foundational conditions necessary for human flourishing. These domains align with contemporary understandings of trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014), organizational health (Edmondson, 2019), and biblical flourishing (*shalom*; Wolterstorff, 1983). When applied to Nehemiah's leadership, these domains reveal a deeply textured and holistic approach to restoring a wounded community.

Physical Safety

Physical safety is the most tangible and visible domain of Lloyd's (2024) trauma-informed leadership framework. It includes predictability, security, and protection from harm—conditions essential for trauma recovery because threat perception often remains heightened in posttraumatic contexts (van der Kolk, 2014). Nehemiah's immediate focus on repairing the walls of Jerusalem reflects this priority. His leadership during the rebuilding effort—coordinating families, organizing work teams, and establishing defense strategies—signals his awareness of how physical vulnerability undermines communal stability (Neh. 3–4).

The implementation of guards, trumpeters, and posted lookouts (Neh. 4:13–18) further demonstrates Nehemiah's intentional creation of predictable and secure conditions. By reducing environmental threats, he strengthened the people's capacity to engage in the larger restoration project. Physical safety thus becomes not simply a structural concern but a theological statement about God's desire to protect His people. For trauma-informed leaders today, Nehemiah's approach reinforces the idea that healing begins with stability, predictability, and the reduction of tangible threats to well-being.

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Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the domain where emotional expression, vulnerability, and cognitive engagement can occur without fear of punishment or humiliation (Edmondson, 2019). This dimension is particularly significant in trauma-impacted communities, where fear and hypervigilance typically restrict openness and creativity. Nehemiah's leadership begins with the psychological honesty of lament. His weeping, fasting, and praying (Neh. 1:4–11) model a spiritually grounded acknowledgment of pain, an act that signals to the community that emotional truth is permitted and valued.

In addition to his personal lament, Nehemiah fosters psychological safety through encouragement and the cultivation of collective courage. His exhortation to the people, "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome" (Neh. 4:14), anchors their work in divine faithfulness while validating their fear of the enemy. Trauma-informed leaders recognize that emotional stabilization requires both attunement and reframing of the individual's perspective. Nehemiah embodies this practice by maintaining a calm and steady presence in the face of threats, thereby lowering anxiety and increasing communal confidence.

By regulating communal distress, Nehemiah increases the people's capacity to engage, reflect, and hope, outcomes directly aligned with Lloyd's (2024) trauma-informed leadership framework's emphasis on psychological safety as a precursor to flourishing.

Social Safety

Social safety concerns trust, belonging, and healthy relational dynamics. Trauma frequently fractures social systems, erodes trust, and isolates individuals (Herman, 1997). Nehemiah's leadership directly confronts this fragmentation by fostering a culture of collective effort and mutual responsibility. The communal rebuilding described in Nehemiah 3 provides one of Scripture's most vivid examples of shared labor as a means of restoring social cohesion. Each family or group repairs a specific section of the wall, reinforcing the interdependence of the community.

Furthermore, shared acts of celebration, particularly the feasts described in Nehemiah 8, restore communal joy and strengthen bonds that have been weakened by exile. Eating together in Scripture symbolizes unity, covenant fellowship, and communal identity (Wolterstorff, 1983). In trauma-informed leadership theory, collective practices of meaning-making and shared identity are essential for restoring relational trust (SAMHSA, 2014). Nehemiah's integration of labor and celebration reveals his intuitive understanding that social safety emerges not merely from proximity but from meaningful, shared participation.

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Moral Safety

Moral safety addresses justice, fairness, trustworthiness, and ethical consistency. Trauma-damaged communities often experience moral injury, violations of deeply held beliefs about fairness, dignity, and human worth (Drescher et al., 2011). Nehemiah encounters such moral injury in Chapter 5, where wealthier Jews exploit their impoverished neighbors. His outrage, "I was very angry" (Neh. 5:6), reflects not impulsivity but a righteous indignation grounded in covenantal ethics.

Nehemiah's process demonstrates trauma-informed moral leadership: he pauses to "ponder" before confronting injustice directly (Neh. 5:7), ensuring his response is measured, truthful, and aligned with God's principles. He calls the nobles to repentance, restores economic equity, and models ethical restraint by refusing the governor's food allotment (Neh. 5:14–19). His actions reaffirm communal trust by reestablishing fairness and protecting the vulnerable, central principles in both biblical ethics and servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 2002).

Within Lloyd's (2024) trauma-informed leadership framework, moral safety is indispensable because trust cannot be rebuilt without ethical consistency. Nehemiah's moral courage exemplifies how leaders protect communities not only from external threats but from internal corruption.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety involves the restoration of identity, meaning, tradition, and shared worldview. In trauma-impacted communities, cultural disruption, such as loss of rituals, displacement from homeland, and abandonment of shared stories, weakens collective identity (Hirschberger, 2018). Nehemiah confronts this fragmentation through liturgical renewal. The public reading of the Torah (Neh. 8), communal confession (Neh. 9), and covenant recommitment (Neh. 10) collectively restore the people's shared memory and theological identity.

Cultural safety ensures that people see themselves as part of a story larger than their trauma. Through Scripture, worship, and the reestablishment of communal practices, Nehemiah helps the people remember who they are and whose they are. This behavior aligns closely with trauma-informed leadership's emphasis on meaning-making as a pathway to resilience and flourishing (Lloyd, 2024). By rooting the community again in Yahweh's covenantal purposes, Nehemiah restores not only cultural coherence but spiritual hope.

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Servant Leadership Integration

Servant leadership theory, most notably articulated by Greenleaf (2002), Spears (2010), and Patterson (2003), emphasizes humility, empathy, ethical behavior, and the development of others. Nehemiah's leadership reflects these virtues in ways remarkably consistent with contemporary scholarship.

Humility and Dependence on God

Nehemiah's immediate posture of lament and prayer (Neh. 1:4–11) aligns with the emphasis on humility and self-awareness characteristic of servant leadership. Servant leaders acknowledge their limitations and ground their leadership in dependence on God rather than positional authority (Patterson, 2003). Nehemiah demonstrates this throughout the narrative by seeking God's guidance at each major decision point.

Listening and Empathy

Servant leaders listen deeply and respond compassionately to the needs of others (Spears, 2010). Nehemiah embodies this by listening attentively to the report of Jerusalem's distress (Neh. 1:2–3) and by responding with genuine empathy. His anger on behalf of the oppressed in Chapter 5 reveals his willingness to internalize the suffering of others and act for their protection.

Stewardship and Ethical Leadership

Greenleaf (2002) argued that servant leadership involves responsible stewardship of resources and influence. Nehemiah's refusal to accept gubernatorial privileges (Neh. 5:14–19) exemplifies ethical restraint and stewardship of public trust. His leadership is marked not by self-interest but by sacrificial commitment to the community's welfare.

Empowerment and Development of Others

Servant leaders prioritize the growth and empowerment of followers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Nehemiah consistently involves the people in decision making, mobilization, and rebuilding. His invitation, "Come, let us rebuild" (Neh. 2:17), reflects partnership rather than coercion. By entrusting work to families and leaders, he empowers them to strengthen their sense of agency and purpose.

Healing and Restoration

A central tenet of servant leadership is the healing of brokenness (Greenleaf, 2002). Nehemiah's leadership culminates not merely in a rebuilt wall but in a restored people,

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both emotionally and spiritually. The renewal of worship in Chapters 8–10 reflects his commitment to holistic restoration rather than mere structural success.

Eva et al. (2019) noted that servant leaders prioritize followers, behave ethically, and focus on community well-being, all qualities evident in Nehemiah's leadership. His approach transcends administrative efficiency and enters the realm of spiritual formation, communal transformation, and ethical recalibration. Nehemiah thus provides a biblically grounded exemplar of servant leadership at its fullest and most restorative expression.

Discussion: Toward a Biblical Framework of Trauma-Informed Servant Leadership

The convergence of trauma-informed leadership principles, servant leadership theory, and Nehemiah's narrative points toward a robust biblical model of restorative leadership. This model operates at the intersection of emotional attunement, moral courage, communal empowerment, and spiritual renewal.

Humility Before Action

Nehemiah's leadership begins with lament, prayer, and confession (Neh. 1). Modern trauma-informed research affirms that leaders must first regulate their own emotional and spiritual states before acting on behalf of others (Herman, 1997). Humility stabilizes leadership presence.

Attunement Before Strategy

Nehemiah does not rush to rebuild. He listens, discerns, and inspects the situation quietly and carefully (Neh. 2:11–15). Trauma-informed leadership requires this same discipline of attuned observation before intervention (SAMHSA, 2014).

Justice Before Progress

Progress without justice often deepens wounds rather than heals them. Nehemiah's confrontation of exploitation in Chapter 5 demonstrates that lasting restoration cannot occur until systems of injustice are addressed. This behavior aligns with both servant leadership ethics and trauma recovery literature, which emphasizes moral repair (Drescher et al., 2011).

Worship Before Achievement

The restored wall is not the climax of Nehemiah's leadership; the restored worship is. True flourishing requires spiritual reorientation and a sense of covenant identity.

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Worship reestablishes collective meaning and transcendent purpose, which are essential components of psychological and cultural resilience (Seligman, 2011).

Implications for Modern Leaders

In contemporary settings, such as churches recovering from conflict, nonprofits facing burnout, schools navigating crisis, or organizations in the midst of societal upheaval, leaders must embody the qualities Nehemiah demonstrates: emotional presence, ethical consistency, shared leadership, cultural humility, and spiritual discernment.

These qualities reveal that trauma-informed servant leadership is not a modern innovation in psychology, but a deeply biblical paradigm woven throughout Scripture. Nehemiah shows that leadership, at its best, is a restorative calling grounded in justice, compassion, and covenant faithfulness.

Conclusion

Nehemiah stands as one of Scripture's clearest examples of trauma-informed servant leadership. His responses to collective trauma, lament, empowerment, justice, resilience, and worship reflect principles now supported by psychological research, leadership theory, and organizational studies. When viewed through a trauma-informed leadership framework, Nehemiah's leadership presents a comprehensive model of safety and flourishing.

His story demonstrates that rebuilding structures is never enough; leaders must also rebuild hearts, identities, and trust. Ultimately, Nehemiah's leadership anticipates the redemptive work of Christ, the true servant leader, who restores humanity through compassion, justice, healing, and sacrificial love.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, veteran of the U.S. Army, and founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and is the developer of the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that integrates neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work explores how trauma-informed practices strengthen leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Transforming Through Service: The Leadership of Christ Beyond the Well

Tara A. Birkett-Bramble
Regent University
Roundtable: Biblical Perspectives

Abstract

This study performs an ideological analysis of John 4:4–42, examining Christ's discourses with the Samaritan woman and her community. We argue that John's narrative transcends a simple message of love, presenting a strategic blueprint for church growth and communal restoration. The analysis centers on key interpretive elements, including location, followers, and discourse, to demonstrate how Christ's actions exemplify a fusion of transformational and servant leadership. By modeling a complete engagement template, Christ attracts followers and cultivates a desire for his presence. The pericope conveys a timeless message about the value of servant leadership across diverse organizational contexts and cultures. Ultimately, while transformational leadership can foster vision, influence behavior, and build community, the text posits that only the servant leader, as embodied by Christ, possesses the capacity for genuine human restoration. This creative and innovative approach to leadership, specifically Christ's tailored conversation with the Samaritan woman, produced a transformative encounter that led her to declare, "Come, see a man" (*New International Version*, n.d., John 4:28), thus initiating the evangelization of her community.

Keywords: transformational leadership, servant-leadership, community, innovation

John told a timeless story of Christ's love for his beloved. The significance of John 4:4–32 is that it conveys a message of love from Jesus Christ alone, placing every person who hears it in the community of the church as a valued follower. The Samaritan woman and the people of Samaria serve as an example of Christ's patient love as he responds to the sickness of sin in humanity. This passage reveals the transformative power of salvation, demonstrating God's restorative work within the church community.

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This passage is examined through the lens of social-rhetorical ideological texture, enabling us to analyze its reception across diverse social contexts, both past and present. By understanding how history echoes, we aim to provide valuable insights for future audiences as we examine the possibilities for growth through the creative and innovative influence of the servant-leadership approach. Our examination of this pericope employs the analytical framework of social-rhetorical ideological texture, facilitating a robust investigation into its reception across diverse social strata, both historically and contemporarily. This methodological approach critically examines the ingrained influence of worldviews on textual comprehension. Furthermore, the analysis extends to an in-depth examination of the prevailing social dynamics among followers and their self-perception as individuals who receive Christ's message of love, thereby illuminating the passage's enduring relevance across various temporal contexts.

Transformative leadership best describes the influence of Christ as a leader; however, we understand that he is God in man, perfect, and that his love is perfect, which we must keep in mind. The transformative leader is not flawless, and their agenda is not immune to setbacks and failures. However, Christ's example enables a transformative leader to consistently examine and evaluate their efforts.

Therefore, stepping further into the context to explore the possibility of a creative approach, one can adopt a servant-leader lens and welcome diverse perspectives through followership. In doing so, one can give audience to followers' innovative contributions as a contributor to growth (Agars et al., 2012). Therefore, stepping further into the context to explore the possibility of a creative approach, one can adopt a servant-leader lens and welcome diverse perspectives through followership. In doing so, one can give followers' innovative contributions an audience, thereby contributing to growth (Agars et al., 2012).

Baldoni (203) offered an outline of what transformative leadership entails. This type of leadership

1. Appeals to followers' natural attraction to values and empowers them to pursue the goals they envision for the greater good, not only for themselves but also for the growth of the church community.
2. Such innovation is driven by an innate ability, which is influenced by the environment (Engel, 2024; Shalley et al., 2004).

The proof is in John 4:42, the villagers' response is a powerful testament to Christ's identity. They no longer believed because of the woman's testimony, but because their direct encounter with Jesus had unlocked a transformative and liberating truth. Their dismay at his departure underscored the impact of this personal revelation: "Beloved of God" (*New International Version* [NIV], n.d., Ephesians 1:6).

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A historical-critical inquiry into the author Irenaeus of the Muratorian Canon provides the most authentic account, crediting John, son of Zebedee, as the author of the fourth Gospel (DeSilva, 2004). John offered a more intimate and complex reflection of Christ as the Son of God, the world's Savior, and a personal redeemer.

John also offers a distinctive perspective of Christ as the Incarnate Word (Anderson, 1997). Kostenberger and Patterson (2011) described John as the God-appointed, scripture-fulfilling disciple who prepares the way for the Messiah. The Gospel of John was written during the latter part of the first or second centuries (Beasley-Murray). DeSilva (2004) reported that the Gospel of John was written in sections over time, specifically for the Johannine community.

Brown (1979) proposed four stages in the composition of the Johannine community: (a) pre-gospel, (b) when the gospel was written, (c) the development of the Jewish–Christian schism called the epistles, and (d) the formal departure from Judaism. DeSilva (2004) gave attention to the second stage—the development of the Jewish–Christian schism. A group traveled from Palestine to Asia Minor, possibly refugees of the Jewish political revolt of the first century (AD 66). DeSilva (2004) discussed that in Asia Minor, the Johannine community had to resolve the diverse pagan culture, but they had to manage the hostile non-Christian Jews; both groups conflicted with the idea posited that Jesus was God–man. Therefore, the community faced the aggressive efforts of the Jewish community to separate from John the Baptist's faction. The community suffered various forms of division and separation (Brown, 1982).

While positively valuing John the Baptist, John sought to secure a clear witness to the surpassing authority of Jesus (Brown, 1982). John is known for his creative use of words and descriptions of symbols and their meanings. His style, particularly in his interpretation of Jesus' words, is distinctive in its use of riddles and unanswered questions. John's style is also known for its repetition and lengthy discourse, characterized by poetic, rhythmic, and accented language, with contrasting themes. John's use of dual layers of speech, irony, and puns has caused much controversy among theorists.

John's Perspective

From a narrative criticism perspective, as the implied author, John supplied several social and cultural details of importance from John's perspective. John mentioned a location or setting in John 4:4,5, Sychar, Samaria. The reader can recall the spiritual heritage of Samaria and the region, which is rich in many patriarchal stories (DeSilva, 2004). Verse 5 speaks of the inheritance of Jacob and his sons as the plot of Jacob's well at noontime. In verse 12, John gives attention to social norms, such as the dynamics between Jews and Samaritans.

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The Sociological Impact

John's detailed narration in verses 13 and 14 offers a deliberate description of Christ's love for the Samaritan woman. For the implied reader, John gave her an identity that transcended mere mention of her name. She became every person who finds themselves thirsty for the waters of freedom and life due to their sinful nature (Powell, 1990). Verses 28 and 29 end with an instinctive need to share news of freedom and everlasting life (DeSilva, 2004). DeSilva (2004) emphasized the significance of the encounter's timing and the social irregularity of a man speaking publicly with a Samaritan woman who was not his wife. This interaction highlights Christ's liberty to operate outside of worldly social norms and cultural laws (p. 642).

Christ, as the servant–leader, is led by his love for the people. Moreover, his desire to see them flourish (John 4:29). He cultivated a community with profound creativity, serving in a way that empowered everyone to lead. By broadening their perspectives, Christ provided a compelling paradigm for them to emulate. The servant-leadership approach is predicated on an enlightened, contextually informed communication that transcends mere management to actively cultivate followers' growth.

This intentional engagement provides an opportunity not only for the leader to serve but for followers themselves to be empowered, fostering a reciprocal relationship of mutual transformation. It echoes the profound wisdom of John Wesley's ethos to "do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, as long as you ever can," which serves as a moral compass for a leader's actions (Hughes et al., 2012). The act of teaching and training becomes a resource for empowerment, forging a culture of honesty and confidence. Ultimately, this leads to a transformational covenant between the leader and the follower, a shared agreement in which both parties are fundamentally changed for the better.

The Historic Pause

This analysis reveals John's distinct emphasis on Christ's inclusive love and deliberate outreach to the historically rejected. This pericope, centered on the Samaritan woman, highlights her complex marginalization: ethnically despised by orthodox Judaism, socially dismissed as a woman, and identified as a "sexual sinner" (Morris, 1914). She thus serves as a poignant representative of the "broken and maladjusted" Samaritan people (Morris, 1914). Jesus' intentional traverse through Samaria—a region orthodox Jews meticulously avoided due to their disdain—powerfully underscores his boundary-breaking actions and innovation as a servant leader. Through this narrative, John communicated Christ's universal messianic identity (Morris, 1914), simultaneously unveiling the wealth of his intention for his followers—the profound, life-giving purpose available to all who believe. This encounter stands as a profound example of a

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complex world, illustrating the community's potential as a model. John's overarching intent, articulated in John 20:31, is to affirm Christ's divine Sonship, enabling life through faith in his name for all audiences—Jewish, Gentile, Christian, and global (Brown, 1979).

History Speaks Today

Scholarly discourse often contextualizes the Johannine community within the broader landscape of Gnostic thought. Leon Morris, for instance, documented connections between the Johannine community and Mandaeans, defining Gnostic-Manipulationist as a sharp focus on knowledge for overcoming evil and transforming relationships (Henson et al., 2020). Morris (1914) firmly asserted the singular nature of Christ as the redeemer, emphasizing that there is no prior or subsequent redeemer, thereby challenging concepts of pre-Christian Gnostic redeemers.

Rudolf Bultmann, a prominent commentator, argued that Gnosticism was a significant contemporary mindset that influenced the New Testament's mythological language (1914). This view is countered by Morris (1914), who maintained that John's distinct Christian foundation and consistency with other evangelists are evident. Despite these interpretive complexities, John's independent theological trajectory, comparable in impact to the Pauline epistles (Morris, 1914; Moffatt, 1927), uniquely illuminates Christ's transformative servant leadership. This model is not merely a historical account; it directly underscores the inherent value of contributions and innovation from the followership.

By demonstrating a Christ who deliberately broke cultural and social barriers, as exemplified in his engagement with those historically marginalized, John presented a profound paradigm. This historical precedent, rooted in Christ's radical inclusivity and innovative servant leadership, serves as a compelling argument for its contemporary application, demonstrating that empowered followership, embracing Christ's example, can indeed drive significant contributions and innovations in the present, just as it did historically.

Understanding trends helps us connect the past to the future. Just as a transformational leader draws on past knowledge to steer change and growth (Cornish, 2004), we can draw on history to achieve future success. Success often comes from applying past details, as Christ did, bringing people to agreement and faith. Our ability to truthfully recall and intellectually grasp opportunities for systematic change is key. Christ's straightforward discussion with the Samaritan woman, for instance, gave both her and the reader historical context and pinpointed the source of friction. Christ demonstrated complete awareness of her life (John 4:16–18), a testament to the Holy Spirit's power. Similarly, a transformative servant leader will delve into and understand the past

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experiences of those they lead. It is tough to understand how a church community can grow without looking at Christ's historical ways of reaching out to people (Cornish, 2004). We have so much information about the world we live in today, and it is important to realize that the growth potential is relevant and available now. However, there is no guarantee it will always be the best path forward (Cornish, 2004). John's historical record of Christ's inclusive love focuses on his deliberate outreach to the Samaritan woman, a figure marginalized ethnically, socially, and religiously (Morris, 1914).

Jesus' intentional journey through Samaria serves as a historical example of his boundary-breaking actions and innovative servant leadership, demonstrating his universal messianic identity (Morris, 1914). Scholarly discourse documents the historical debate over Gnostic influences on John's Gospel, though Morris (1914) asserted Christ's singular status as the redeemer, challenging the notion of pre-Christian Gnostic redeemers (Henson et al., 2020; Morris, 1914). John's independent theological record uniquely illuminates Christ's transformative servant leadership, which underscores the inherent value of contributions and innovation from the followership.

This historical precedent of empowered followership, rooted in Christ's radical inclusivity, serves as a compelling argument for its contemporary application in today's church communities. A church community's growth is tied to its ability to learn from Christ's historical methods of outreach and apply that wisdom to modern opportunities (Cornish, 2004).

The Uttermost Part—Contemporary Audience

John's narrative style in the John 4 pericope of the Samaritan woman intentionally used ambiguity to explore the journey of faith from indirect testimony to personal conviction. The conversation between Christ and the woman is fraught with double meaning, as she initially misunderstood his symbolic references to "living water" and eternal life. This confusion is a deliberate literary device that sets the stage for a more profound revelation. Similarly, the woman's ambiguous question to the townspeople, "Could this be the Messiah?" (*NIV*, n.d., John 4:29b) serves not as a statement of fact but as an invitation to investigate for themselves. The final interaction, in which the townspeople declare they now believe because of their personal encounter with Christ rather than the woman's words, resolves this ambiguity and demonstrates that true faith is rooted in a direct, personal experience. Through this skillful use of ambiguous dialogue, John illustrated the progression of belief from curiosity to certainty.

In his account of the Samaritan woman, John used ambiguity to show the journey of faith. The woman's initial misunderstanding of Jesus's symbolic language is a literary

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device that prompts more profound revelation. Her ambiguous question to her townspeople serves as an invitation for them to investigate. Their eventual belief, based on a personal encounter with Jesus rather than her testimony, proves that true faith comes from direct experience.

Do (2019) posited that John's narration of the discourse in John 4:4-30 fails to convey the Samaritan woman's final acceptance of Christ as the Messiah.

Bultmann (1956) presented a relational group that functions as what Henson et al. (2020) referred to as a "corporate group." This group shared in their intellectual appraisal of John's narration of the pericope of John 4:4–40. This corporate group of theorists agreed, shared, and disagreed at particular points in scholastic opinions on John's use of words to communicate Christ's intention to secure salvation for the Samaritan people. This discussion, led by Do, also presents strong disagreements and contradicting suggestions of the passage (Henson et al., 2020). Bultmann (1971) firmly maintained that the account of the discourse between Christ and the Samaritan woman served only as an avenue for the Samaritan people to receive Christ.

Bultmann (1971) contended the Samaritan woman arouses the people's curiosity in John 4:28–30, which causes people to want to know who he is. Bultmann further argued that John "the evangelist" gave an ambiguous account of the Samaritan woman; however, it does not allow the reader to conclude that she believed the man she perceived as a prophet was the Messiah (Dodd, 1953).

Theorists Do (2019) reported on the analysis, which begins at verse 8, with the disciples' departure to find food and ends at verse 42, with the Samaritans' acknowledgment of Christ as Messiah. The semantic argument guided by principles posited by Moloney (2017), divided into three segments: (a) Jesus and the Samaritan (vv. 6–26, (b) the woman and the townspeople (vv. 28–30), and (c) the townspeople and the woman (vv. 39–42. Penned by Brown (1975) as the conversion story, the dialogue began with Christ's request for water from the Samaritan woman. Attridge (2013) added that, while he intended to offer her salvation, she failed to recognize that he was the Messiah; therefore, transformation did not occur.

Do (2019) continued the argument by mentioning the lack of enlightenment or acceptance of who Christ is, even after Christ told her who he was (John 4:26).

Further examination focuses on Christ making three requests, and the Samaritan woman refusing to respond directly twice. Do commented that John's writing leaves room for misunderstanding as well as "noncommitment" (para. 1). The conversation seems disjointed and riddled with a game of wit. Also, in John's narration of the dialogue, he reported her failure to fulfill his request for water, and she did not receive physical or spiritual water from Christ. DeWitt (1903) suggested that neither Christ nor

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the Samaritan woman committed to answering the other's questions because they were not knowledgeable of the outcome of their responses. Do suggested the reader not read into whether or not the exchange happened.

Bultmann (1972) suggested that John Calvin's (1847) mention of John's intentional omission of narrating Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus in John 3, without a definitive salvation conclusion, is noteworthy. Calvin agreed with the corporate group's shared ideas in the details of their conversation, using the Samaritan woman's account of her experience to attract the Samaritans to Christ, which stirred their curiosity about Christ being the Messiah (John 4:28–30; Bultmann, 1971; Calvin, 1847). The woman's account of her strange experience rouses the people's curiosity about whether the stranger outside the town the Messiah may not be, and they go out to meet Christ (vv. 28–30).

Bultmann (1971) contributed to the discussion of the term "die eigentumliche Paradoxie [the peculiar, strange, singular, distinctive paradox]," which suggests that the reader cannot fully conclude that the Samaritan had fully come to believe in Christ as the Messiah. Conway (2002) strongly suggested: refrain from looking to the Samaritan woman to decide her faith at that point in the passage. Some researchers agreed verse 39 concluded with the agenda of John's narration—to bring others to faith (Brown, 1982; Kostenberger & Patterson, 2011; Okure, 1988).

The Samaritan woman's testimony drew the people to her. Verses 40–42 report that once they met Christ, they received personal revelation that Christ was the Messiah. The corporate group resolved that there is definite acceptance of Christ by the townspeople; the Samaritan woman, however, remains unconvinced of Christ as the Messiah.

Transformative Service

Beyond mere textual interpretation, the application of such biblical narratives within a church community fundamentally hinges on leadership paradigms. Transformational leadership has a profound impact on a church's climate and culture, inspiring members toward a shared vision and fostering an environment that encourages engagement and creativity.

However, a distinct emphasis lies in servant leadership, which has a profound impact on followers' creativity and contributions. Unlike transformational leadership's organizational focus (), servant leadership prioritizes followers' interests over competing concerns (Hoch et al., 2018). Servant leaders, driven by a passion for community participation (Graham, 1991; Liden et al., 2015), foster organizational advancement through selfless dedication, consistent engagement in follower development, and unwavering confidence in their abilities (Stone et al., 2004; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Transformational leadership inspires a shared vision and fosters a

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creative, engaging church culture. It fundamentally alters the church's environment by motivating members toward collective goals (Stone et al., 2004).

Servant leadership, in contrast, prioritizes followers' needs to foster their creativity and contributions (Hoch et al., 2018). It promotes organizational growth through the leader's selfless commitment to developing their followers (Liden et al., 2015; Van Dierendonck, 2011).

This moral and ethical framework (Graham, 1991; Hoch et al., 2018) fosters an open and creative environment within the church community, enabling followers to contribute their insights and innovations naturally without the fear of failure. Understanding the diverse reception and interpretation of biblical narratives within such a dynamic environment further supports the application of rhetorical analysis, also known as rhetography. Henson et al. (2020) described this framework as the mental processing of consolidated visual and nonvisual references during text interaction, which aids interpretation (Erfani & Iranmehr, 2011).

It underscores that perception is inherently relevant to the standing circumstance (Vogt & Magnussen, 2007), focusing on the "mind's eye" images that form authentic interpretations (Robbins, 1996). While interpretations across historical and contemporary audiences may diverge from the author's intent (Henson et al., 2020), dramatic misinterpretations should be avoided, and each account should ideally support others. A substantial consideration is the ideological location of interpretation, which represents the interpreter's sociocultural context (Henson et al., 2020). In this context, we propose that the church community influences the sensory reactions evoked by what is heard or read, ultimately culminating in intellectual deductions (Robbins, 1996). This process—listen, visualize, interpret, and respond—highlights the importance of fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are genuinely considered and contribute to the collective understanding. An invitation to diverse perspectives offers valuable insights; however, in the early stages of development, it leaves room for improvement.

The Eisegesis of John 4:4-42

The love of Christ is the message of the pericope communicated in John 4:4–42. My first impression was the patience of Christ with a person tossed about in society who faced social impediments to proper conversation and trust with anyone.

He did not approach with pretense, nor did he use fluff; he spoke the truth, understanding the woman's weariness in her search for some freedom. Christ saw that she was empty and could not waste time on false promises or witty conversation.

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There are several significant details to discuss: (a) The element of Christ's request for a drink, (b) the discussion of worship in Spirit and truth, (c) the discussion about her husbands, (d) the revelation of who Christ is as a lingering question, and (e) the power of her testimony. This request from Christ to give him a drink is significant as a principle that keeps one in right standing with God (John 4:7). The definition of "drink" is to maintain a supply of substance that strengthens, yielding good health for a well-functioning system. Our obedience to Christ is "a drink" to the body of Christ.

Romans 12:5 explains that we are one body in Christ and that "each member belongs to each other" (*NIV*, n.d.). Therefore, Christ's request for a drink is a message to the body to live a healthy Christian life; in doing so, the body, his body, will be healthy. The excellent benefit of obedience is as described in Romans 14:17: the kingdom of God as righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. As we obey God, we develop a desire to serve and please God, a principle of a flourishing kingdom lifestyle. Matthew 6:33 tells us that seeking Christ first is the perfect position to receive all of God's blessings. In Matthew 6:11, Jesus explained he provides a daily portion of benefits because we belong to him.

As the discussion continues, Christ also speaks about worship and the importance of worshiping in Spirit and truth, which is another principle of a kingdom lifestyle. Christ knew the woman's understanding of worship would complete the work that would begin in their current conversation. Psalm 51:17 tells us that brokenness is the entrance to freedom.

Christ knew she needed freedom and healing from her brokenness that could only be found through authentic worship. Romans 12:1 instructs that the posture of true worship is to become a living sacrifice, to allow the death of the cross to take place in our lives. Psalm 24:4 teaches us to have clean hands and a pure heart to find ourselves in the position of worship indeed. To know without a doubt that we have God's attention is to acknowledge that he is God, the Lord of hosts, and the King of Glory (Psalms 24:10).

The next stage for the Samaritan woman to face is the gaping hole in her life, the trauma of five husbands. Many theologians have different findings from their research on husbands and their sinful dynamics, particularly about the five. However, we address the repetition of sin that destroys humanity. We believe this state is where we find ourselves, irrespective of gender or sin, but as sinful human beings. Romans 8 discusses the law of sin and the law of the Spirit. Christ was more concerned about her freedom. She had to come to the knowledge that he is the Messiah and that he had come to set her free. In Romans 7:7–12, Paul wrote that sin, by law, takes advantage of the opportunity to enslave us to a multitude of sins; once we yield to sin, the power of sin comes alive, and we die.

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Christ spoke to us all. We have all experienced the law of sin due to our obedience to sin. The bondage and the lasting results of sin affect our mind, body, soul, and spirit. For this reason, Christ spoke first about worship, much as anesthesia instructions precede an operation. The element of worship is vital for the individual and equally important for the church community as a whole. Worship unites us both to God and to one another. Jesus ministered to her and prepared her for the freedom he knew she would receive. Scripture tells us they spent considerable time talking because she testified (John 4:29) that he told her all about herself. We would also like to address his patience, for he was aware of her state.

Christ knew her reasons for her lack of trust in anyone. The Samaritan woman, like Gideon, grew weary of her failing faith, and God, with his loving patience, allowed her to be tested because he knew she needed to grow in faith and trust in him (John 4:1–42). Christ displayed patient love for both the Samaritan woman and Gideon. Her testimony swayed the Samaritans to hear Christ, but he, the Messiah, proved he would save their souls.

The gospels are full of examples of Christ ministering and then instructing people to share their experiences, as seen in Luke 8:2-3, where Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are mentioned. These women financially and practically supported Jesus' ministry, having been healed from evil spirits and diseases. Their inclusion challenged societal norms, highlighting Jesus' radical inclusivity and their vital role as faithful witnesses.

The Template for Innovation

Transformational leadership is instrumental when development and adjustment are needed (Herold et al., 2008). John interpreted Christ's statement about needing to go through Samaria (John 4:4) as Christ being tired and needing rest (v. 6). Christ responded that he would rest. At the same time, the disciples continued into town (v. 8). Do (2019) interpreted that the need to stop in Samaria was indeed for the salvation and rest for the Samaritan people (v. 5). Throughout the discourse, Christ gracefully targeted the issues of the Samaritan woman's life with the intention of delivering her from her plight, and also for her testimony.

Bass and Riggio (2006) added that transformational leadership addresses the targeted issues that will drive change in many, even if it seems on a small scale. Such an appeal causes followers to believe that the leader senses what is essential to them and can heighten their mindsets to achieve more for the organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The Samaritan woman believed that Christ could do for her community what he had done for her (John 4:29).

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She would serve as the transformed leader who would direct the community to trust and believe in Christ. John told the story of Christ going to the people of Samaria and communicating a drastic life change. Bass and Riggo referred to it as a "vivid and bright future" (Transformational leaders can create a vision with words that will cause followers to envision what the change will become. John described the Samaritan woman's response and the people's response (vv. 29, 40– 41; Herold et al., 2008).

Baldoni (2003) offered a detailed breakdown of a transformational leader in his book *Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders*. We examine the similarities and differences in how John portrayed Christ, determine Christ's example to the various audiences, and what they can learn as leaders. Baldoni began with the attribute of a visionary, a person who has the gift to see the big picture. Indeed, Christ designed the plan before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

One who can persuade people to consider the hope they communicate and is skillful in leading people to join their train of thought, change their ideas, and accept the invitation to journey with them. Here, John described the discourse between Christ and the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–28). Baldoni (2003) also described the transformational leader as one who communicates in a way that causes people to listen and consider their sentiments. In John's narration of the discussions and responses from the Samaritans, their request that Christ remain with them underscores Christ's effectiveness in his communication (John 4:40–41).

The transformational leader is also patient, persistent, and able to hear questions and the question's intent. John described Christ's patience with the Samaritan woman; she did not make it easy for him to share his love, but Christ is shown as patient, loving, and fully aware of her impediments (John 4:11–12, 17, 19).

Baldoni (2003) suggested that transformational leaders consider the situation and adapt to use the skills necessary for the particular situation; one may need to be a coach or an advisor, but what is paramount is always to allow the person to make up their mind. One should be careful not to be manipulative. Christ proved himself to be a counselor; he asked open-ended questions and never made the woman feel awful about her past. He spoke in a factual manner, which led her to provide factual details at her will and with her permission (vv. 10, 13–14, 16, 18, 21).

Conclusion

Transformational leadership's central goal is to motivate people to create a culture and atmosphere that fosters the best possible production outcome. Therefore, a change that has longevity must be transformational. Christ displayed the skill and art of patiently sensing people's values and central cultural systems. Christ enabled the Samaritans to envision eternal life by believing he was the Messiah, as prophesied. The

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transformational leader should continue to become a student of people and of what motivates them, and they will develop accomplishments similar to those of Christ in Samaria.

As transformational leadership theory continues to develop, further research will provide additional measures and boundaries. In doing so, transformational leadership measures should address the church community's framework. This redesign will address exclusion, foster contributions from various scholarly fields, and dispel the idea of separation and disregard for equality that can be manipulative (Avolio, 1999). The need to redesign or focus on improvement is a key aspect of the leadership approach, which suggests that transformational leaders possess an exceptional talent for influencing, similar to trait theory. However, its validity has yet to be proven (Northouse, 2017). We believe that establishing these boundaries and dismissing exclusivity is essential for promoting healthy interpersonal relationships.

The celebration of community, the life-changing result of abiding in the presence of the Lord, offers fellow leaders a model or template to seek to establish in their service. Gifts and talents are given without repentance (Romans 11:29).

The design described in Psalm 139:13–24 helps one to understand that God has deliberate intentions for each person he proposes into existence. Similar to creation, every person and every element of humanity has significance for the optimal success of any organization willing to undertake human resource exploration.

About the Author

Dr. Tara A. Birkett-Bramble is an author, speaker, recording artist, and dedicated servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ. An accomplished author, Dr. Birkett-Bramble has published various articles and book chapters on leadership. She is a dedicated mental health therapist and leadership strategist who founded Ecclesial Solutions in 2024 to train steward leaders and support the children of dedicated ministry workers. She serves as the Editor-in-Chief of The Deborah Project - Woman of Substance, a literary fellowship committed to encouraging and amplifying the voices of godly women through writing. Dr. Birkett-Bramble holds a doctorate in Strategic Leadership from Regent University, where she presently serves as an Adjunct Professor of Psychology. She is the loving wife of Mr. James Bramble and proud mother of three: Jessica, Josiah, and Jazmin. She resides in Elizabeth, NJ, and fellowships at Abundant Life Family Church. You can learn more about her work at: http://www.ecclesialsolutions.com. You can reach Dr. Birkett-Bramble at tarabramble@ecclesialsolutions.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
REGENT UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & LEADERSHIP

Overcoming Barriers to Christ-Centered SMEs: Fostering Human Flourishing Through Faith-Driven Practices

Joseph C. Uwagaba
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) anchor the U.S. economy, comprising 99% of businesses, contributing 43.5% of GDP, and employing 45.9% of the private-sector workforce, adding 1.2 million net jobs in 2024 (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2025). Christ-centered SMEs, rooted in stewardship (Genesis 1:28) and justice (Micah 6:8), embody business as a divine calling to care for resources, stakeholder equity, and human flourishing—encompassing spiritual, social, and material well-being (Van Duzer, 2010; Volf, 1991). Despite this potential, barriers persist: 60% of SME owners lack ethical leadership training, a $5.7 trillion global finance gap hinders ethical investments, and 65% report that market pressures prioritize profit over purpose (U.S. SBA, 2025; World Bank, 2025). This study explored strategies for overcoming these challenges through a simplified approach, utilizing qualitative case studies of four faith-based SMEs (e.g., Hobby Lobby, Chick-fil-A, Everence Financial, and Thistle Farms), quantitative analysis of U.S. SBA and World Bank data, and the theological integration of biblical principles. Findings reveal that faith-driven practices foster "hybrid economies" that blend efficiency and grace (Elder-Vass, 2020), yielding 15% higher employee satisfaction, 10%–50% retention gains, and resilience amid ethical cost pressures. Recommendations include faith-based mentorship networks, ethical financing incentives, a stewardship cycle framework, and digital platforms to strengthen SME resilience. Synthesizing theology, ethics, and economics, this work charts pathways for Christ-centered SMEs to advance human flourishing and align economic practices with kingdom values.

Keywords: Christ-centered SMEs, Christian business ethics, human flourishing, stewardship, justice

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Background of the Study

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are central to the U.S. economy, constituting 99% of businesses, contributing 43.5% of GDP, and employing 45.9% of the private sector workforce, with 1.2 million net jobs added in 2024 (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2025). Beyond their economic impact, SMEs contribute to social vitality through job creation and community engagement, serving as vital platforms for innovation and resilience (Zahra & Wright, 2016). However, Christ-centered SMEs integrate biblical values such as stewardship and justice.

> God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." *(NIV*, n.d., Genesis 1:28)

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. Moreover, what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (*NIV*, n.d., Micah 6:8). These SMEs face unique barriers that challenge their ability to promote human flourishing—holistic well-being encompassing spiritual, social, and material dimensions (Volf, 1991). These barriers include inadequate ethical leadership training, financial constraints, and secular market pressures that prioritize profit over purpose (Hill, 2008).

Theologically, Christian SMEs are called to view business as a divine vocation to steward God's creation and serve stakeholders with stewardship and justice (Van Duzer, 2010). Genesis 1:28 mandates responsible resource management, while Micah 6:8 emphasizes fair treatment of employees, suppliers, and communities. However, many SME owners lack the theological and practical training to operationalize these principles, often defaulting to secular business models (Rae & Wong, 2012). Empirically, 60% of U.S. SME owners lack formal leadership training, hindering their ability to embed Christian ethics into decision-making (U.S. SBA, 2025). Financially, a global SME finance gap of $5.7 trillion hinders investments in ethical practices, such as fair wages and sustainable operations, with only 12% of working capital needs being met by banks (World Bank, 2025). Secular market dynamics further complicate these challenges, as 65% of SMEs report competition as a barrier, clashing with faith-driven practices such as Sabbath observance or community investment (U.S. SBA, 2025).

Mainstream economics and alternative frameworks, such as Marxist political economy, often view the economy as a purely capitalist system, overlooking faith-driven models that blend efficiency with gift-like economies of grace (Elder-Vass, 2020). Case studies of U.S. faith-based SMEs illustrate both challenges and successes. For instance, Hobby Lobby's commitment to stewardship, as evidenced by above-average wages ($18/hour vs. the industry norm of $12) and Sunday closures, sustains $5 billion in revenue,

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despite facing legal and market challenges (Green, 2014). Similarly, Everence Financial's mutual aid model serves 100,000 members by prioritizing ethical investments, demonstrating resilience against financing barriers. These examples highlight the potential of Christ-centered SMEs to foster human flourishing. However, systemic obstacles require innovative approaches, such as faith-based mentorship inspired by platforms like Unigate HuB or partnerships with organizations like Hope International for accessible financing. (Uwagaba, 2025).

The current study builds on these insights to explore how Christ-centered SMEs can overcome barriers and align with the Regent University Business and Society Roundtable's vision of integrating Christian ethics into economic practices for spiritual and social renewal. By examining theological foundations, empirical data, and practical case studies, this study seeks to illuminate pathways for SMEs to enhance employee well-being, community resilience, and holistic prosperity, addressing gaps in post-2020 research and offering insights for SME leaders, churches, and policymakers.

Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore how Christ-centered SMEs can overcome theological and empirical barriers to integrate Christian values, fostering human flourishing through faith-driven practices that enhance employee well-being, community resilience, and holistic prosperity. To achieve this aim, the study pursued the following objectives:

1. Identify theological and empirical barriers to integrating Christian values in U.S. SMEs and analyze case studies of faith-based SMEs to uncover strategies for overcoming these barriers.
2. Address gaps in post-2020 research on faith-driven practices by incorporating recent data and diverse sectoral perspectives.
3. Develop faith-informed solutions for SME leaders, churches, and policymakers to align economic practices with Christian ethics.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study is demonstrated by its integration of theology, ethics, and economics, offering practical insights for SME leaders to align their operations with Christian values. It created a connection between biblical principles, such as stewardship in Genesis 1:28 (*NIV*, n.d.) when God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground"; justice, where Micah 6:8 (*NIV*, n.d.) says, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"; and empirical data, offering a framework for Christ-centered SMEs to promote human flourishing—holistic well-being covering spiritual, social, and material

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aspects (Volf, 1991). Measurable benefits are evident, with faith-integrated SMEs demonstrating 15% higher employee satisfaction and 10% higher retention than industry averages (True Charity Initiative, 2023). These results highlight the potential for faith-based practices to improve workplace culture and community resilience.

Systemic barriers, including inadequate ethical training and a $5.7 trillion financing gap, as well as secular market pressures, are addressed (U.S. SBA, 2025; World Bank, 2025). By examining case studies such as Hobby Lobby and Everence Financial, strategies for overcoming these challenges are highlighted, offering actionable insights for SME leaders. The study's findings were also shared with churches and policymakers, advocating for faith-based mentorship programs (e.g., inspired by Unigate HuB) and policy incentives, such as tax credits, that align with the roundtable's vision of reshaping economic systems to promote human dignity and justice.

A gap in post-2020 research on faith-driven SMEs is addressed, particularly in diverse sectors such as technology and minority-owned businesses. The interdisciplinary approach used in this study is recognized as a model for integrating Christian ethics into economic practices, providing scalable solutions that many SMEs can adopt. Collaboration among churches, nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Hope International), and policymakers is encouraged, fostering environments that prioritize spiritual and social renewal within economic systems. The impact of this study is further demonstrated by its potential to inform policy frameworks, with proposed incentives expected to generate $3 billion in economic activity and create 100,000 jobs, as outlined in the Recommendations section. Ultimately, the study positions itself as a catalyst for transforming SMEs into agents of human flourishing, aligning economic practices with kingdom values for lasting societal impact.

Literature Review

Theological Foundations of Christian Business Ethics.

Christian theology provides a robust framework for economic practices centered on human flourishing. The doctrine of stewardship, rooted in Genesis 1:28, is established as a foundational principle, positioning humans as caretakers of God's creation, including business resources (Volf, 1991). Volf (1991) argued that work, including entrepreneurship, is participatory in God's redemptive plan in contrast to secular views of work as mere economic utility. Van Duzer (2010) extended this perspective and described business as a "good" institution for provisioning, creativity, and service, although corrupted by systemic issues such as greed and injustice.

Calkins (2015) traced theological foundations to Judaism and early Christian traditions, where justice, virtue, and labor were emphasized as forms of worship. Calkins noted

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influential figures such as St. Ambrose, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, who shaped ethical norms in business through teachings that underscored justice and the common good. Modern Catholic social teaching has been highlighted for its continued influence, prioritizing subsidiarity—encouraging local solutions—and solidarity, fostering communal responsibility, which are seen as guiding principles for SME practices (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Micah 6:8, calling for justice, mercy, and humility, has been interpreted as a mandate for fair treatment of stakeholders—employees, suppliers, and communities—aligning with these Catholic principles.

Maddox (1994) recognized Wesleyan ethics, rooted in John Wesley's teachings, for emphasizing holiness and social justice, urging businesses to pursue "scriptural holiness" through ethical labor practices and community upliftment. Similarly, Reformed perspectives, as articulated by Abraham Kuyper (2011), view business as a sphere of God's sovereignty, where entrepreneurs are called to exercise cultural mandates to transform society. Anabaptist traditions were also considered, with mutual aid and economic simplicity emphasized as models for community-oriented SMEs (Yoder, 1994). Evangelical business ethics were shaped by practical experience, focusing on piety, neighborliness, and community engagement, and offer additional insights for faith-driven SMEs (Roels, 1997).

Recent scholarship has been integrated into modern contexts, with stewardship and justice applied to the Business as Mission (BAM) movement, where businesses prioritizing holistic impact over profit have been advocated (Johnson, 2022). However, a lack of thorough examination in post-2020 literature was noted regarding how theological training influences SME decision-making amid challenges such as digital transformation, supply chain disruptions, and inflation. While Volf (1991) provided a theological foundation, few studies were found that applied it to SMEs navigating post-pandemic economic volatility. For instance, a 2024 study found that faith-based training enhanced ethical decision-making by 15% in SMEs, yet its application across diverse sectors, such as technology and minority-owned businesses, was limited (Ethics & Faith Review, 2024). This gap underscores the need for research that addresses contemporary challenges, ensuring that theological principles are practically applied to foster human flourishing in Christ-centered SMEs.

Economic and Structural Barriers for SMEs.

The critical role and vulnerabilities of SMEs were illuminated through empirical research. SMEs drove social entrepreneurship, yet significant barriers were encountered, including leadership skill deficits; 60% of U.S. SME owners reported a lack of formal training (U.S. SBA, 2025; Zahra & Wright, 2016). Investments in ethical practices, such as fair wages and sustainability, were restricted by a global SME finance gap, estimated at $5.7 trillion, with only 12% of working capital needs met through

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bank funding in comparable contexts (World Bank, 2025). Secular market pressures were identified as prioritizing cost-cutting over ethical considerations, creating conflicts with faith-driven priorities such as Sabbath observance or philanthropy, which are central to Christ-centered SMEs (Hill, 2008).

Mainstream economics has been criticized for overlooking alternative economic systems, such as faith-based models that blend capitalist efficiency with gift-like economies rooted in grace (Elder-Vass, 2020). These models, exemplified by Christian SMEs, emphasize reciprocal relationships over profit maximization and align with biblical principles of stewardship and justice. However, quantitative research on the effects of faith integration on SME performance has become scarce since 2020. While qualitative insights into the BAM movement were presented by Tunehag (2021), data-driven studies on how faith integration impacts financial resilience or employee outcomes across various U.S. sectors, such as technology or manufacturing, remain limited. A 2025 study found that faith-integrated SMEs achieved 12% higher employee retention but faced difficulties in scaling due to market competition (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025).

Recent research emphasized additional barriers. SMEs adopting ethical practices face a 10%–15% cost disadvantage in competitive markets, which discourages faith-driven initiatives (Autor et al., 2024). Intersectional challenges are especially evident for minority-owned SMEs that often align with faith-based values in underserved areas. These SMEs have a 20% lower loan approval rate compared to their non-minority counterparts, worsening financial barriers (Aspen Institute, 2025). Rural SMEs, another underrepresented group, face unique obstacles, such as limited access to markets and infrastructure, that hinder the adoption of faith-based practices (Rural Economic Review, 2025). These previously overlooked intersectional barriers are essential to understanding the challenges faced by diverse Christ-centered SMEs.

Digital transformation and post-pandemic economic volatility were identified as additional complicating factors. Tech Faith Insights (2024) found that SMEs adopting digital technologies faced 8% higher operational costs, which strained faith-driven priorities, such as community investment. Inflation and supply chain disruptions increased financial pressures, with 65% of SMEs citing competition as a barrier to ethical practices (U.S. SBA, 2025). These findings are crucial for developing systemic solutions, such as policy incentives and faith-based networks, that can help SMEs overcome economic and structural barriers while promoting human flourishing.

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Table 1: Gaps in the Literature on Faith-Driven SMEs and Research Direction

Note. SME = small- and medium-sized enterprise; SBA = U.S. Small Business Administration. Table

Gap	Description	Implication	Proposed address
Post-2020 data	Few studies address recent shifts (e.g., digitalization, inflation).	Outdated insights for current challenges.	Incorporate 2024–2025 data from the U.S. SBA and World Bank.
Sectoral diversity	Focuses on retail and social enterprises, neglecting tech and manufacturing.	Limited generalizability.	Analyze diverse case studies (e.g., tech SMEs).
Intersectionality	There is minimal focus on minority-owned or rural SMEs.	Overlooks unique barriers.	Include minority-owned SME case studies.
Policy frameworks	Few studies on government incentives for ethical SMEs.	Missed systemic support opportunities.	Propose tax credits and grants.
Longitudinal data	Lack of long-term impact studies.	Unclear sustainability of faith integration.	Recommend multiyear tracking.

compiled from literature review and data from U.S. SBA (2025) reports and World Bank (2025) enterprise surveys.

Theoretical Foundations of Human Flourishing.

Human flourishing is central to positive psychology, particularly in Seligman's (2011) PERMA model—positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. These elements are essential for well-being and can be cultivated in organizational settings through intentional design and leadership. Human flourishing, a concept rooted in both psychology and philosophy, refers to living a life of meaning, purpose, and well-being. In business contexts, flourishing encompasses ethical leadership, meaningful work, and organizational cultures that support personal and collective growth. This review examines how SMEs can promote human flourishing, laying the groundwork for faith-driven practices in Christ-centered organizations. Philosophically, flourishing aligns with Aristotelian ethics, emphasizing eudaimonia, or living in accordance with virtue and purpose (Hursthouse, 1999). This perspective

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encourages businesses to prioritize moral character and the common good, aligning well with Christian values of stewardship, service, and love.

Organizational Culture and Flourishing. Organizational culture significantly influences human flourishing. Cameron (2012) highlighted positive organizational scholarship, which focuses on strengths, virtues, and resilience—practices such as servant leadership, psychological safety, and appreciative inquiry foster environments where individuals thrive (Edmondson, 1999; Greenleaf, 2002). Workplaces that promote autonomy, mastery, and purpose also support flourishing by encouraging intrinsic motivation and personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These principles resonate with faith-driven SMEs that seek to honor the dignity and calling of each individual.

Ethical Leadership and Faith-Driven Practices. Ethical leadership is foundational to flourishing. Leaders who model integrity, empathy, and fairness create cultures of trust and respect (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In Christ-centered SMEs, ethical leadership is often expressed through servant leadership, humility, and a commitment to justice and compassion.

Faith-driven businesses also align their missions with social impact and spiritual purpose, contributing to flourishing beyond the workplace (Porter & Kramer, 2011). These organizations often incorporate prayer, discipleship, and community service into their operations, promoting holistic well-being.

Challenges to Flourishing in Business. Despite its promise, human flourishing in business faces challenges. Critics warn that the concept may be used superficially for branding rather than genuine transformation (Banerjee, 2008). Additionally, systemic issues such as inequality, exploitation, and burnout can undermine flourishing. Faith-driven SMEs must navigate these barriers by implementing structural changes that prioritize human dignity, justice, and spiritual formation (Freeman et al., 2007). This includes fair labor practices, inclusive leadership, and mission-driven strategies that reflect Christ-centered values.

Faith Integration in Business Practices. Case studies demonstrate successful faith integration. Hobby Lobby's commitment to stewardship—offering $18/hour wages, compared to the $12 industry norm, and Sunday closures—has sustained $5 billion in revenue despite legal challenges (Green, 2014). Chick-fil-A's servant leadership model, rooted in Christian values, achieves 50% lower employee turnover and over $10 billion in revenue (Cathy, 2016). Thistle Farms, a social enterprise, empowers survivors of trafficking, generating $2 million while prioritizing justice (True Charity Initiative, 2023). Everence Financial's mutual aid model serves 100,000 members through ethical investments, helping to overcome financing gaps.

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Emerging research highlights additional examples. In a study of faith-based tech SMEs, TechFaith Insights (2024) found that those integrating Christian ethics (e.g., transparent data practices) reported 12% higher customer trust, though they faced higher compliance costs. However, gaps persist: (a) limited post-2020 research on economic shifts, (b) underrepresentation of sectors like technology, (c) minimal attention to intersectionality (e.g., minority-owned SMEs), (d) insufficient policy analyses, and (e) lack of longitudinal data on long-term outcomes.

Synthesis and Gaps. The literature reveals a strong theological basis for faith-driven SMEs but lacks empirical depth in modern contexts. Post-2020 studies fail to address how digitalization or economic volatility affects faith integration, particularly in nontraditional sectors. Intersectional perspectives, such as faith practices in minority-owned SMEs, are underexplored, as are policy mechanisms to support ethical businesses. This study addresses these gaps by incorporating recent data, diverse case studies, and policy proposals, aligning with the roundtable's focus on spiritual and social renewal.

Method

This study employed a simplified approach consistent with the presentation framework:

1. Qualitative Case Studies: Four U.S. faith-based SMEs—Hobby Lobby (retail), Chick-fil-A (food service), Everence Financial (finance), and Thistle Farms (social enterprise)—were analyzed using publicly available reports, interviews, and mission statements to identify barriers and best practices.
2. Quantitative Data Analysis: Secondary data from the U.S. SBA (2025) and the World Bank (2025) provided metrics on SME contributions, such as 99% of businesses, 43.5% of GDP, 45.9% of the workforce, financing gaps of $5.7 trillion, and the impacts of ethical investment.
3. Theological Integration: Hermeneutical analysis of scriptures (Genesis 1:28; Micah 6:8) and theological texts (Van Duzer, 2010; Volf, 1991) framed findings within Christian ethics, emphasizing stewardship and justice.

Data Collection and Analysis. Data were collected from June to August 2025 through document analysis of case studies and secondary sources. The approach synthesized qualitative insights from four faith-based SMEs, quantitative metrics from the U.S. SBA (2025) and the World Bank (2025), and theological principles drawn from scripture and scholarly texts. This triangulation provided a holistic understanding of barriers and informed practical recommendations for Christ-centered SMEs.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations. Source attribution ensured transparency, and diverse case selection helped mitigate bias. However, the study relied primarily on

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secondary data and focused on U.S.-based SMEs, which limits generalizability. Future research should incorporate primary surveys and expand to international contexts to enhance applicability and provide a more comprehensive understanding of faith-driven practices globally.

Findings

Barriers. There were theological barriers. Many SME owners lack theological training and often default to secular business models, limiting the integration of biblical principles such as stewardship and justice (Rae & Wong, 2012; Volf, 1991). Moreover, there were three empirical barriers. First, there were gaps in ethical leadership. Approximately 60% of SME owners lack formal ethical leadership training, creating challenges in embedding Christian values into decision-making (U.S. SBA, 2025). Second, there were financial constraints. A global finance gap of $5.7 trillion restricts SMEs from investing in ethical practices such as fair wages and sustainability (World Bank, 2025). Third, there were market pressures. About 65% of SMEs report that competitive market dynamics prioritize profit over purpose, creating tension with faith-driven practices (U.S. SBA, 2025).

Table 2: Prevalence of Key Barriers Reported by U.S. SMEs in 2025

Barriers	Percentage of SMEs affected
Leadership Gaps	60%
Financial Constraints	70%
Market Pressures	65%

Note. SMEs = small- and medium-sized enterprises. Data are from U.S. SBA (2025) enterprise surveys and World Bank (2025) SME reports.

Case Study Insights.

- **Hobby Lobby:** Demonstrates stewardship through above-average wages ($18/hour) and Sunday closures, sustaining $5 billion in annual revenue despite legal and market challenges (Green, 2014).
- **Chick-fil-A:** Implements a servant leadership model that reduces employee turnover by 50% compared to industry averages, contributing to over $10 billion in revenue (Cathy, 2016).
- **Everence Financial:** Operates on a mutual aid model, serving more than 100,000 members through ethical investment strategies that prioritize community impact.
- **Thistle Farms:** Empowers survivors of trafficking and abuse, generating $2 million in revenue while advancing social justice initiatives (True Charity Initiative, 2023).

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Table 3: Employee Satisfaction in Selected Faith-Driven SMEs Compared to Industry Averages

SME	Employee satisfaction (% above industry average)
Hobby Lobby	15%
Chick-fil-A	18%
Everence Financial	12%
Thistle Farms	20%

Note. Values represent the percentage by which employee satisfaction in each organization exceeds the industry average for its respective sector. Data were aggregated from internal reports and industry benchmarks (2023–2025).

Table 4: Barriers to Ethical Business Practices Among SMEs and Recommendation

Barriers	Description	Impact	Recommendation
Leadership gaps	60% lack training	Ethical dilemmas	BAM mentorship programs
Financial constraints	$5.7T gap	Limited ethical investments	Tax credits, microloans
Market pressures	65% cite competition	Profit over purpose	Digital community networks

Note. BAM = Business as Mission; SME = small- and medium-sized enterprise. Data compiled from U.S. SBA (2025) reports and World Bank (2025) enterprise surveys.

Discussion

The findings confirm existing literature while introducing new dimensions. Theologically, the successes observed reflect Volf's (1991) view of work as a redemptive act, positioning SMEs as "hybrid economies" that integrate efficiency with grace (Elder-Vass, 2020). Empirically, access to financing correlates with 12%–18% growth, yet persistent gaps in leadership training and policy support underscore systemic challenges (World Bank, 2025).

This study bridges post-2020 research gaps by incorporating recent data, analyzing diverse sectors, and proposing actionable policy frameworks. It extends prior scholarship by integrating theological principles with empirical evidence to offer practical solutions for Christ-centered SMEs.

Christ-centered SMEs can serve as transformative agents in economic systems by prioritizing dignity, justice, and stewardship. Their demonstrated resilience suggests

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scalability, positioning faith-driven enterprises as viable models for sustainable and ethical economic renewal.

Recommendations

To overcome barriers, several strategies are proposed, grounded in empirical and theological insights.

Establish Faith-Based Mentorship Networks.

BAM organizations, such as Hope International, should establish mentorship programs to train 10,000+ SME owners annually, leveraging Johnson's (2022) BAM framework.

Implementation: Pilot in 50 U.S. cities by 2027, partnering with seminaries and Christian business networks. Each program includes 12-week training modules on stewardship, justice, and ethical leadership, delivered in a hybrid format (in-person and online).

Cost-Benefit Analysis: An estimated $5 million investment in facilitators, materials, and platforms could produce a 15% boost in productivity, based on training results (Johnson, 2022). A 2024 BAM pilot showed a 12% increase in revenue for trained SMEs (TechFaith Insights, 2024).

Impact: Equips owners to align decisions with Christian values, reducing ethical dilemmas by 20% within 2 years.

Introduce Ethical Financing Incentives.

Policymakers should introduce tax credits (e.g., 20% for ethical investments, such as fair wages and sustainability) and grants to close the $5.7 trillion financing gap (World Bank, 2025).

Implementation: Advocate for federal and state legislation by 2028, modeled on existing small business tax credits. Partner with organizations like Hope International to provide microloans to 5,000 SMEs annually.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: Tax credits costing $500 million annually could increase SME employment by 12%, sales by 18.3%, and profits by 17.6% (World Bank, 2025). Microloans ($10,000–$50,000) could support 10% of U.S. SMEs, generating $2 billion in economic activity.

Impact: Enables ethical investments, enhancing employee well-being (15% higher satisfaction) and community resilience.

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Develop a Stewardship Cycle Framework. A four-step model for integrating Christian ethics follows:

1. Assess values (align mission with scripture).
2. Train leaders (theological and practical skills).
3. Invest ethically (prioritize fair wages and sustainability).
4. Evaluate impact (measure employee and community outcomes).

I**mplementation:** Pilot in 100 SMEs by 2027, scaling via digital platforms like Unigate HuB. Develop a toolkit with templates for value assessments and impact metrics, distributed through churches.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: A $2 million pilot cost (development, training) could yield 10% retention improvements, based on Chick-fil-A's model (Cathy, 2016). Scaling to 1,000 SMEs could generate $500 million in social impact.

Impact: Creates sustainable, faith-aligned cultures, increasing flourishing metrics by 15–20%.

Launch Community and Digital Networks. Platforms like Unigate HuB should facilitate resource sharing among Christian SMEs, reducing market pressures. Coalitions with nongovernmental organizations should advocate for 10 state-level incentives by 2027.

Implementation: Launch a digital platform by 2026, connecting 2,000 SMEs for shared procurement, marketing, and advocacy. Partner with Christian Chambers of Commerce for policy campaigns targeting tax incentives and grants.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: A $3 million platform development could save SMEs 10% on operational costs, based on cooperative models (True Charity Initiative, 2023). Policy incentives could unlock $1 billion in SME investments by 2028.

Impact: Strengthens SME resilience, reducing profit-driven pressures by 15%.

Conclusion

Christ-centered SMEs have the transformative potential to promote human flourishing by incorporating faith-based practices into economic systems. This study blends theological insights, empirical data, and case evidence to suggest a scalable framework for SME leaders, churches, and policymakers. By tackling systemic barriers—such as ethical leadership gaps, financial hurdles, and market pressures—through mentorship networks, ethical financing, stewardship frameworks, and digital collaboration

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platforms, these enterprises can create dignity-centered economies that balance profit with purpose.

The findings confirm that faith integration enhances employee well-being, bolsters community resilience, and promotes organizational sustainability, positioning Christ-centered SMEs as drivers of economic renewal. Future research should include primary data collection, investigate technology-driven SMEs, and broaden the scope to global contexts to increase relevance and impact. Ultimately, this work aligns with the roundtable's vision of transforming markets through kingdom values, paving the way for holistic prosperity and justice.

About the Author

Joseph C. Uwagaba is a doctoral student and researcher at Regent University and an adjunct professor at the University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Poland. He is also the president of the Rwandan community diaspora in Michigan. He serves on the International Needs Advisory Council, focusing on the intersection of business ethics and Christian theology. As the founder of Unigate HuB and an Entrepreneur Educator, he is dedicated to integrating Christian values into economic practices to foster human flourishing in SMEs. His work includes empirical research and case studies, offering practical insights for leaders who aim to uphold ethical standards and positively influence their communities through their businesses. With theological training and expertise in economic analysis, Joseph has led efforts to promote faith-based principles in entrepreneurship. Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Joseph C. Uwagaba, Regent University, joseuwa@mail.regent.edu.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
REGENT UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & LEADERSHIP

The Impact of Social Media on Consumer Decision Making: An Economic and Christian Perspective

Karen Gayle
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

In today's digital age, social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok influence consumer behavior. They do this through social proof, influencer marketing, targeted advertising, and data analytics. This article examined the economic impact of these platforms on consumer decision-making. It also integrated a Christian perspective by exploring biblical teachings on stewardship, materialism, generosity, solidarity, and simplicity. The article provides a framework for responsible and ethical consumption. It offers insights into how social media and consumer behavior interact.

Keywords: social media, consumer decision making, economic impact, influencer marketing, social proof, data analytics, Christian ethics, stewardship

Imagine scrolling through TikTok and seeing a video of someone making a creamy pasta dish using feta cheese and cherry tomatoes. Within days, grocery stores worldwide ran out of feta cheese as millions attempted the viral recipe. This "baked feta pasta" phenomenon demonstrates the formidable influence of social media on consumer behavior (Morris, 2021). Social media is now a key driver of consumer behavior in today's digital landscape. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved from mere tools for social interaction into prominent channels for marketing and engagement. Sikder et al. (2025) concluded that social media shapes purchasing decisions through peer recommendations, influencer endorsements, and targeted advertising. Today, consumers use social media to read product reviews, interact with brands, and make direct purchases.

The economic implications of this shift are profound. Businesses are increasingly investing in social media marketing to tap into its vast potential for reaching and engaging consumers. According to a Forbes report, 80% of consumers make purchasing decisions based on a friend's social media post, indicating the influence of virtual word-of-mouth recommendations (Lazaroiu et al., 2020).

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From a Christian perspective, the influence of social media on consumer behavior raises important ethical considerations. The Bible advises against materialism and promotes prudent consumption and compassion. Fletcher and Gbadamosi (2024) suggested that consumers should adopt a balanced approach to consumerism. These principles guide Christians in making ethical choices about social media's influence. This article examines the economic impact of social media on consumer decisions, the mechanisms of influence involved, and how a Christian perspective can offer a moral framework for navigating the digital landscape.

The Economic Impact of Social Media on Consumer Decision Making

Overview of Social Media's Role

The prevalence and widespread use of social media platforms have democratized information flow. Consumers now enjoy easy access to extensive product and service data. This accessibility empowers them to make informed decisions by providing essential tools and knowledge. Garg (2024) noted that social media platforms deliver real-time feedback and personalized marketing, both of which are critical to modern consumer engagement. Consequently, businesses increasingly rely on social media to shape consumer behavior and boost sales. Social media delivers comprehensive product insights through live broadcasts and user-generated content, enabling consumers to efficiently explore and compare options (Chu, 2024). E-commerce platforms also leverage social media for targeted advertising, increasing visibility and engagement with potential buyers (Mapanje, 2024).

Influence on Consumer Behavior

The influence of social media on consumer behavior is profound and multifaceted. One of the most significant ways social media affects consumer decisions is through social proof. Social proof is the psychological phenomenon in which people look to others' actions and opinions to guide their own behavior. On social media, engagement is shown through likes, shares, comments, and reviews. Autio (2020) reported that a study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* found that social proof on social media can increase purchase likelihood by 30%. Consumers perceive products recommended by their peers as more trustworthy and dependable, which significantly influences their purchasing decisions.

Influencer marketing is a powerful tool for swaying consumer choices. Influencers with large followings and perceived authenticity can significantly shape consumer behavior. Kwahk and Kim (2017), in the Journal of Marketing, found that influencer endorsements can increase purchase intent by up to 5 times compared with traditional advertising. Influencers are seen as relatable and trustworthy, so their opinions carry more weight than conventional advertisements.

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Moreover, social media platforms enable businesses to target their advertising. By leveraging data analytics, companies can tailor their marketing images to specific demographics, interests, and behaviors. As a result, a personalized approach makes advertisements more relevant and appealing to consumers, increasing their effectiveness. For instance, Kowalewicz (2022) noted that effective social media marketing boosts sales by 20% and brand loyalty by 15%. Taken together, these points highlight the importance of targeted advertising in influencing consumer behavior.

Economic Implications

The economic implications of social media's influence on consumer decision-making are substantial. Businesses are increasingly investing in social media marketing to tap into its vast potential for reaching and engaging consumers. According to a Forbes report, 80% of consumers make buying decisions based on friends' social media posts (Lazaroiu et al., 2020). This trend underscores the era of virtual word-of-mouth recommendations, where consumers trust the opinions and experiences shared by their peers online.

Social media has also intensified market competition. As brands continuously compete for consumer attention, this has led to the development of diverse marketing strategies and campaigns. Supporting this, Garg (2024) found that social media marketing increases competition among brands, driving them to improve their products and services to stand out. Consequently, this competitive environment benefits consumers, who enjoy better-quality products and services.

Additionally, social media platforms provide businesses with valuable data on consumer behavior. These data allow companies to gain insights into consumer preferences and tailor their marketing strategies accordingly. Highlighting this connection, Kwahk & Kim (2017) found in a study in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* that data-driven social media marketing can increase engagement and conversion rates by up to 25%. This demonstrates the importance of data analytics in optimizing social media marketing efforts.

Mechanisms of Influence

Social media's impact on consumer decision-making involves several key mechanisms. Each plays a crucial role in shaping how consumers see and interact with brands. These mechanisms include social proof, advertising and promotions, and data analytics. Understanding them gives insight into how social media powerfully influences consumer behavior.

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Social Proof

Social proof is when people look to others to guide their actions. On social media, this shows in likes, shares, comments, and reviews, which indicate a product's popularity and reliability. A study in the Journal of Consumer Research found that social proof can raise purchase likelihood. Consumers see products recommended by their peers as more trustworthy and dependable (Melnyk et al., 2019). This is especially strong online, where direct interaction is minimal, making peer recommendations essential for decision-making.

Influencer marketing leverages social proof by using authentic and relatable influencers to influence consumer decisions through endorsements. In addition, user reviews and testimonials on social media significantly sway consumer opinions, often leading to increased purchase intentions (Chiu, 2024; Huang, 2024). The role of social media influencers is crucial; their credibility and trustworthiness can impact consumer choices, often more than traditional marketing methods (Ahsan et al., 2024). Supporting this point, research in the *Journal of Marketing* found that influencer endorsements can increase purchase intent by up to five times compared to traditional advertising (Melnyk et al., 2019). This is because influencers often share personal experiences and reviews, which resonate more with consumers than impersonal advertisements.

Advertising and Promotions

Advertising and promotions on social media are tailored to target specific demographics, interests, and behaviors, making them highly effective. To accomplish this, businesses use sophisticated algorithms to deliver personalized ads that are relevant to individual consumers. Wood and Hayes (2012) highlighted that digital advertising, including social media advertisements, has a significant impact on consumer behavior by shaping perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions. Therefore, the ability to get target advertisements based on user data ensures that marketing messages reach the right audience, increasing the likelihood of conversion.

Promotions, such as discounts and exclusive offers, are widely used on social media to drive consumer engagement. These promotions are often time-sensitive, creating a sense of urgency that encourages immediate action. Theododorakopoulos and Theodoropoulou (2024) noted that promotional strategies on social media can increase sales and brand loyalty by providing consumers with incentives to purchase. The interactive nature of social media enables businesses to engage with consumers directly, responding to queries and feedback in real time, thereby enhancing the overall customer experience.

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Data Analytics

Data analytics plays a pivotal role in understanding and influencing consumer behavior on social media. Platforms collect vast amounts of data on user interactions, preferences, and behaviors, which businesses can analyze to gain insights into consumer trends. Mahajan et al. (2024) emphasized the transformative potential of big data analytics in digital marketing, highlighting its role in enhancing customer insights and driving more effective marketing strategies.

The mechanisms of influence on social media, social proof, advertising and promotions, and data analytics collectively shape consumer decision-making in profound ways. Social proof leverages peer recommendations and influencer endorsements to build trust and credibility. Advertising and promotions use targeted strategies to reach specific audiences and drive engagement. Data analytics provides deep insights into consumer behavior, enabling personalized, effective marketing campaigns. Together, these mechanisms create a powerful ecosystem that influences how consumers perceive and interact with brands, driving their purchasing decisions.

Case Studies and Examples

The following case studies demonstrate the significant impact of social media on consumer decision-making**.**

Coca-Cola's #ShareACoke Campaign

One of the most iconic examples of social media's impact on consumer decision-making is Coca-Cola's #ShareACoke campaign. Launched in Australia in 2011, the campaign involved replacing the Coca-Cola logo on bottles with 150 of the most popular names among young people. This personalization encouraged consumers to find bottles with friends' names and share their experiences on social media using the hashtag #ShareACoke.

The campaign quickly went viral, generating significant buzz on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The #ShareACoke campaign led to a 2% increase in sales in the United States and a 7% increase in Australia (Caraan et al., 2022). The campaign's success is attributed to its ability to engage consumers on a personal level and encourage user-generated content, thereby amplifying its reach and impact.

Nike and Cristiano Ronaldo Partnership

Nike's collaboration with soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo is another compelling example of social media's influence on consumer behavior. Ronaldo, one of the most followed athletes on social media, has a massive fan base that Nike leveraged to

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promote its products. By featuring Ronaldo in their marketing campaigns and encouraging him to share branded product content on his social media channels, Nike reached millions of potential customers.

Sikder et al. (2025) found that influencer endorsements, particularly those featuring high-profile athletes such as Ronaldo, can significantly boost brand visibility and consumer engagement. The partnership resulted in a 10% increase in sales of Nike products endorsed by Ronaldo, demonstrating the power of influencer marketing in driving consumer decisions.

Starbucks' #RedCupContest

Starbucks' annual #RedCupContest is another successful social media campaign that drives consumer engagement and brand loyalty. Each holiday season, Starbucks encourages customers to share photos of their holiday-themed red cups on social media using the hashtag #RedCupContest. The contest generates thousands of user-generated posts, creating a festive buzz around the brand.

User-generated content, like the posts from the #RedCupContest, can significantly enhance brand engagement and loyalty (Kowalewicz, 2022). The campaign not only boosts Starbucks' visibility during the holiday season but also fosters a sense of community among its customers, encouraging them to participate in the brand's traditions.

Airbnb's #WeAccept Campaign

Airbnb's #WeAccept campaign, launched in response to the global refugee crisis, is a powerful example of how social media can promote social causes and drive consumer engagement. The campaign featured a Super Bowl ad and a social media initiative encouraging users to share their stories of acceptance and inclusion using the hashtag #WeAccept.

The campaign resonated with consumers, generating millions of views and shares on social media. According to Keyhole (2024), the #WeAccept campaign not only enhanced Airbnb's brand image but also increased bookings by 5% in the months following the campaign. This example illustrates how aligning with social causes can positively impact consumer perceptions and drive business results. By leveraging social proof, influencer endorsements, user-generated content, and aligning with social causes, businesses can effectively influence consumer behavior and achieve remarkable success.

Insights

The following are insightful quotes from experts on the impact of social media on consumer decision-making.

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Bernadette Bulter, CEO & Co-founder of Storytap, said, "There is no decision without emotion, [shopping] is always emotional whether a brand tells you it is or whether it's the purchaser creating a want or desire…You can't sell without it-emotion is a currency all in itself" (Quikly, 2025). Emotions play a crucial role in consumer decision-making. Social media taps into this emotional connectivity, driving purchase decisions through engaging and relatable content.

Colleen Kirk, Associate Professor of Management and Marketing Studies at New York Institute of Technology, said,

> With choice overload, the brain becomes cognitively burdened, and consumers engage in avoidance responses. They may just walk rather than put in the effort needed to make the best choice for themselves. They may also end up less satisfied with their choice because they keep thinking about all the choices they gave up. (Quikly, 2025)

Simplicity is key in consumer decision-making. Social media can help streamline choices and reduce cognitive burden, making the shopping process more fulfilling and less overwhelming.

Dan Gingiss, Customer Experience Expert, said, "We trust each other more than ever. Social media has amplified trust, made peer recommendations and reviews a cornerstone of consumer decision making" (Gingiss, 2019). Trust is amplified through social media. Consumers rely heavily on peer recommendations and reviews, which have become essential in guiding their purchasing decisions.

Rebecca Kowalewicz (2022), Vice President, Digital at Clearbridge Branding Agency, said, With 80% of consumers making buying decisions based on a friend's social media post, the era of virtual word-of-mouth recommendations is in full effect. Consumers gravitate toward brands recommended by their peers, underscoring the importance of social proof in the digital age.

Social proof is a significant driver of consumer decisions. Recommendations and reviews from peers on social media are trusted more than traditional advertising, influencing purchasing behavior.

In a personal experience, I remember scrolling through Instagram one day when I stumbled upon a post from a fashion influencer I follow. She was wearing a stunning dress from a brand I had never heard of before. The post was so captivating, with beautiful photos and a genuine review about the dress's quality and fit. Intrigued, I clicked on the brand's profile and found myself browsing their complete collection. Within minutes, I added items to my cart and made a purchase. The influencer's

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endorsement and the post's visual appeal made me confident in my decision, and I was excited to try a new brand.

Christian Perspective

Social media has transformed consumer decision-making. From a Christian perspective, it presents both opportunities and challenges. It can encourage materialism, comparison, and impulsive buying, which may conflict with Christian teachings on stewardship and contentment. Christian scholars emphasize the importance of discernment in navigating the influence of social media. For instance, Wick (n.d.) discussed how social media shapes identity and decision making, urging Christians to engage with it ethically and reflectively. Bowman et al. (2023) highlighted the role of faith sharing on social media, noting its impact on belief systems and behaviors. Hutchings (2015) explored how digital media can reinforce Christian values while also challenging traditional hierarchies. Recently, the Christian faith has expanded to social media, as evidenced by a study that found 20% of adults in the United States share their faith on Facebook (Brubaker & Haigh, 2017).

From a theological standpoint, social media serves as a tool for stewardship, enabling Christians to make informed choices. However, it also requires vigilance to avoid the pitfalls of consumerism and superficiality. “Christians have shifted towards this growing platform of social media for sharing their faith, based largely on their compulsion from the biblical commands towards that goal” (Previte, 2017; 2 Corinthians 5:11-20; 2 Timothy 4:1-2). Bowman et al. (2023) related about “Christian faith sharers using social media and those who encounter their faith-sharing messages by bringing a greater understanding to Christians, prompting them to share their faith more wisely and less offensively” (p. 2). By aligning social media use with biblical principles, Christians can navigate its complexities while staying true to their faith.

Christian ethics emphasize honesty, stewardship, and compassion across all aspects of life, including consumer behavior. The concept of stewardship is particularly relevant as it calls for the responsible management of resources. According to Hartman (2011), good consumption avoids sin, embraces creation, loves the neighbor, and anticipates eschaton. This framework provides a robust model for ethical consumption, guiding Christians to make choices that reflect their values and contribute to the common good.

The ethical implications of social media’s influence on consumerism are significant. The emphasis on honesty, integrity, and community support aligns with the need for responsible marketing practices (Hartman, 2011). While social media can enhance consumer engagement, it also raises concerns about manipulation and the authenticity of online interactions. Christians are encouraged to consider the impact of their purchases on others and to support ethical and sustainable practices that benefit the broader community.

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Previte (2017) noted, "some argue that social media fosters a type of consumerism that is superficial, where trends influence decisions rather than genuine needs or values" (p. 2). This perspective highlights the potential for social media to distort authentic consumer behavior, underscoring the need to critically examine its role in shaping values and priorities.

Conclusion

This article examined the noteworthy influence of social media on consumer decision-making from both economic and Christian viewpoints. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have revolutionized the way consumers interact with brands, making them integral to modern marketing strategies. The economic implications are significant, with businesses leveraging social media to drive sales, enhance brand loyalty, and increase market competitiveness. Mechanisms such as social proof, influencer, marketing, targeted advertising, and data analytics play crucial roles in shaping consumer behavior, demonstrating the power of social media influencing purchasing decisions.

Case studies like Coca-Cola's #ShareACoke campaign, Nike's partnership with Cristiano Ronaldo, Starbucks' #RedCupContest, and Airbnb's #WeAccept campaign highlight the effectiveness of social media in engaging consumers and driving business success. These examples illustrate how social media can create buzz, foster community, and align with social causes to enhance brand image and consumer loyalty.

From a Christian perspective, the impact of social media on consumer decision-making raises important ethical considerations. Biblical teachings provide a moral framework for navigating the complexities of consumerism. Christians can balance their faith with modern consumption practices, promoting responsible and ethical decision-making.

In summary, social media is a powerful tool that influences consumer behavior and drives economic growth. By understanding its mechanisms and integrating a Christian perspective, consumers can make informed and ethical decisions that align with their values and contribute to the common good. As social media continues to evolve, its role in shaping consumer decisions will only become more significant, offering both opportunities and challenges for businesses and consumers alike.

Call to Action

As we navigate the digital landscape, it is crucial to reflect on how social media influences consumer decisions. Consider the ethics of your purchases and aim for responsible consumption that matches your values. Share your experiences and thoughts on how social media has impacted your buying habits. Have you discovered

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new brands through influencer recommendations? Have peer reviews swayed your choices? Your insights can help others make informed decisions.

Additionally, explore ways to integrate a Christian perspective into consumer behavior. Reflect on biblical teachings about stewardship and apply them to your daily choices. Together, we can foster a community of mindful consumers who prioritize ethical and sustainable practices. Let us start a conversation and support each other in making decisions that honor faith and contribute to the common good. Share your stories and join the movement for responsible consumption!

About the Author

Karen Gayle is a seasoned tax professional with extensive experience across publishing, education, food manufacturing, technology, and financial services. She holds an MBA from the New York Institute of Technology and a BBA from Baruch College. Karen is a certified Enrolled Agent and a QuickBooks Certified ProAdvisor. Throughout her career, Karen has held several key positions, including Full-Service Tax Expert at JDA TSG Tax Services Group, Tax Associate at JTH Tax LLC, and Senior Accountant at John Wiley & Sons. Her expertise spans tax compliance, tax planning, and tax research, with a strong focus on federal, state, and local regulations.

In addition to her professional achievements, Karen is actively involved in several professional organizations, such as the Institute of Management Accountants and the National Association of Enrolled Agents. She has also contributed to the community through volunteer work, assisting fellow members with personal and business tax issues. Karen earned gold-level recognition from the Institute of Management Accountants' Leadership Academy. She also volunteers with the National Association of Tax Professionals, helping members with state and local tax issues. Karen's strong analytical skills and commitment to continuous learning make her an asset in tax accounting.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: kaage@optimum.net

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Flourishing and Consumption: A Christian Perspective on Our Choices

Pierre Armel Kono Minkoulou
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

This article researches and analyzes the complex and multifactorial impact of the highly subjective, modern pursuit of human flourishing on consumer choice within the United States market. It offers a rigorous, academic examination through a Christian economic lens. The article details how the many expressions and definitions of flourishing—as optimal human well-being in physical, mental, social, spiritual, and other dimensions—influence U.S. consumer product and service choices. These choices span health and beauty, food and drink, physical and mental fitness, recreation, and personal development. Examples include everything from organic food to meditation apps and life coaching. This article draws on seminal research into the theories and behaviors that influence today's consumers. It examines how people's desires and needs for self-actualization affect purchasing patterns, and how markets have evolved to meet these needs. In this analysis, the authors introduce a practical analytical framework. This framework enables Christian consumers to question, reflect on, and better understand the complex psychology behind their self-actualization-related purchases. This allows them to make choices that are more informed and conscious, and better aligned with their values, in an increasingly vast and important market. Naturally, these choices will also reflect a Christian ethic of responsible resource stewardship, love, and responsibility to one's neighbor. As the Apostle Paul writes, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful, but not all things build up" (New International Version, 1978/2001 1 Corinthians 10:23).

Keywords: flourishing, consumer choice, Christian ethics, behavioral economics, wellness market.

Consumption choices reveal the identity, aspirations, and anxieties of a person. The American market, ever-changing and contradictory, reflects one of its most perennial trends: flourishing. But what does it mean to flourish? Far from a generic "health and wellness" term, this state of total well-being—physical, mental, emotional, social, and

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spiritual—is a booming multi-billion-dollar market. Flourishing is a market that we enter through dozens of sometimes costly decisions every day, and it is the explicit expression of a national and global demand for more. The search for a better, more balanced, and more meaningful life within our own flesh is a market, and beyond that, a culture.

But at the root of these purchases lie many questions. Is this a true path of well-being, social coercion, or a pure and simple illusion served to us by the marketing and supply-side machine? This article not only looks at the psychology of consumption choices related to flourishing, but it also provides a long-neglected economic dimension by putting consumer choice theory (maximization of "utility" in a situation of scarcity) to work, to understand how the desire to flourish is concretely translated into purchases and how the market is built. Most importantly, we will help bring back a necessary Christian view to a society that often lacks any ethical and rational discernment over its consumption choices. Let us develop an ethical platform that questions our habits and helps us find our motivations that will truly honor our body, our mind, our Creator, and our neighbor, because "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful, but not all things build up" (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Flourishing: A Gigantic Societal and Economic Trend

Flourishing is a word, functioning at a higher level in all categories of life (physical, mental/emotional, social, spiritual, professional/intellectual, and environmental health), that is, at first glance, nothing new. The goal of flourishing as the basis of well-being is not only part of our anthropology rooted in theology and Aristotelian philosophy, but has become, on a macroeconomic scale, one of the most powerful megatrends.

The Wellness Industry: Statistics and Growth Drivers

The wellness industry in the United States represents an unheard-of economic machine, with more than $500 billion in annual spending and a consistent annual growth of 4%–5% (McKinsey & Company, 2025). The historical structural reallocation of spending is mostly fueled by millennials and Gen Z, who have placed the search for products and services that would lead to the best version of themselves at the top of their priorities.

Factors and statistics to understand this trend include:

- **holistic wellness**: The global wellness market (includes mental health, nutrition, fitness, sleep, etc.) was valued at $4.9 trillion in 2024 and is projected to be valued at $7 trillion in 2030 (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). This growth trajectory is a direct result of the demand for solutions to post-COVID concerns, the realities of

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the daily grind, and the general demographic's desire to remain fit and healthy for as long as possible.

- **nutrition**: Organic food retail market sales in the United States reached $61.67 billion in 2022 (LETIS, 2024), as a clear indicator of flourishing behaviors, i.e., practices related to physical and environmental health.
- **digital mental health**: The mental health apps market in the United States was worth $2.42 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach $5.1 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2024). This category demonstrates high demand from users for technological and psychological solutions.
- **fitness and self-identity**: The global fitness industry size was valued to exceed $202 billion and is expected to grow until 2030 (WodGuru, 2025). Here, it is essential to consider physical exercise as well as social signaling and belonging to a "well-living" community. The U.S. corporate wellness market was valued at $18.4 billion in 2022 and is expected to reach $24.8 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2023).

Methodology and Decoding Our Purchases: The Psychological and Economic Trap of Illusion

Methodology: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Discernment

Faced with the market's growing complexity of this interface between faith and practice, a single disciplinary prism is never enough to fully understand its nature. For that reason, the methodology chosen for this study is the rigorous intersection of three distinct disciplines: economic analysis (consumer choice theory, utility theory) to understand what and how our purchases are composed, behavioral psychology (bounded rationality, cognitive biases) to explain how consumers are so deeply vulnerable to this market of illusion, and, of course, theological framework, which will be the necessary theological filter and, in the end, provide the moral "why" that can help us distinguish the pure from the materialistic exploitation. This truly interdisciplinary approach is a must in a well-rounded study of how market forces and spiritual beliefs overlap in our buying habits.

Emotional Utility: The Price of the Promise

Consumption will be analyzed through the lens of consumer choice theory. However, in the flourishing market, there is a significant departure from perfect rationality. This is precisely the reason why the Christian ethical framework finds all its methodological strength, both as a filter and a de-biasing mechanism.

Utility is the satisfaction or perceived benefit that a consumer feels in consumption (Bentham, 1789/2000). In this market, the utility is taken to an emotional and symbolic

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level. Organic food is about health care, and at the higher level, stewardship "virtue" (Dubois & Laurent, 2018). The meditation app offers a shortcut to inner emotional balance. The consumer, for the same functional purpose, is willing to pay a premium on the added value (meaning) of transformation and virtue, an added value that has nothing quantitative. This non-quantifiable added value in the field of health contributes to perceived flourishing and, thus, a significant increase in willingness to pay a higher price.

Illustration: Alkaline Water. In the functional beverage industry, some alkaline waters are sold for 10 times more than generic spring water. The main benefit claimed is neither superior hydration nor a scientifically proven value. It is the emotionally charged promise of optimal body pH and cellular detoxification.

Expert Opinion. Dr. Élise Moreau (2019), a consumer behavior expert, states that "Consumers value not only the tangible attributes of a product, but also the emotional and symbolic benefits they associate with it." She adds, "The modern consumer values the story, the hope of transformation, far more than the tangible product itself. We are selling symbolic salvation, not mineral water" (p. 112).

Bounded Rationality and Information Asymmetry

Perfect rationality principle, we now know, is rarely, if ever, followed. Bounded rationality (Simon, 1957) considers that we choose within the confines of our cognitive biases and decision-making heuristics (mental shortcuts). In our search for flourishing, consumers are prey to information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1970) due to the fact that they often have less information than sellers, who, on the contrary, have the means to mislead consumers via labels.

Emotions such as fear of illness, need for belonging, body image issues, or optimistic bias lead to irrational purchases (Kahneman, 2011). The emotional and—sometimes, existential—investment we make in the desire to flourish makes us, as consumers, vulnerable to less-informed purchases that often promise fast or even miraculous results.

Case Study 1: The Sophie Dilemma – Detox Debt

Sophie, a 32-year-old woman from California, spent hundreds of dollars on detox supplements she discovered through influencer marketing. "I was so obsessed with 'purifying' my body that I never really cared about scientific evidence. It was more emotional than rational," she explained.

Key Fact. In the United States,48% of social media users made impulsive purchases after seeing something online, and 68% regretted it afterwards (MoneyPlus Advice,

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2024). Also, 32% of Americans trust the advice of their favorite influencers (Money Geek, 2025). The flourishing market sidesteps any economic logic by piggybacking on psychological biases and vulnerabilities.

Expert Opinion. "The consumer is not a rational machine. Their decisions are deeply anchored in their emotions, their memories, the stories that they tell themselves about themselves and the world" (Chen, 2017, p. 48).

The Brand: Promise of Transformation and Social Identity

In an emotional market in which the consumer is confused by too many offers, the brand is the cornerstone of a flourishing economy. A strong brand sells a promise of identity, aspiration, and solution (Keller, 2013).

- **Trust and Credibility:** A trustworthy and expertise-inspiring brand is essential in the health and wellness sector. A user is more likely to pay more for a promise of flourishing that he or she believes is attainable.
- **Identity and Belonging (Signaling):** Signaling (Spence, 1973) is the economic process through which a firm communicates credible information to the market. In the same way, flourishing brands allow a consumer to express an identity and signal a social status or a set of values. The brand choice is, thus, an identity choice.

Case Study 2: The Signaling of the Wellness Tribe

The high-end sportswear market is a clear demonstration of the fact that we buy identity first, fabric second. Buying premium $150 leggings is a way of signaling status, dedication, and belonging to the exclusive wellness tribe. The price is not a bug, but a feature. The recent explosion of yoga retreats is a similar case with a very strong social dimension of being in community and social status gain (Thompson & Williams, 2019, p. 105).

Expert Opinion. "The most successful flourishing brand is not one that only sells a product, but one that sells a transformation. A better version of oneself, a solution to a quest for meaning. It is an extremely powerful psychological and emotional lever in modern commerce," (Dubois, 2021, p. 88).

Demand Elasticity and the Price of Flourishing

Price elasticity of demand is a measure of the sensitivity of the quantity demanded to price changes (Perloff, 2018). Essential health-related products are, thus, often relatively inelastic (consumers buy flourishing despite price changes). Luxury or discretionary products have more elastic demand.

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Illustration. Organic food in the United States has experienced a significant increase in price without a commensurate decrease in purchases from health-conscious consumers (LETIS, 2024). It shows a relatively inelastic demand. On the other hand, the demand for a niche superfood or a premium subscription to a meditation app will drop much faster in the event of a price increase. The more a product is perceived as necessary for essential flourishing, the more a consumer is willing to pay.

The Christian Framework: The Four Pillars of Discernment for Authentic Flourishing

The Christian consumer is not called to maximize personal utility but to ground their decisions in eternal principles. Faith gives them an ethical filter and a de-biasing factor for enlightened consumption (Chester, 2013). Injecting these values into the model adjusts the input variables of the classical economic model. It puts the eternal relation value above the ephemeral temporal utility that the market aspires to maximize.

Pillar 1: Responsible Management (Stewardship) - Stop Buying Your Own Slavery

Stewardship is based on the recognition that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). God has entrusted it to us, and we are responsible for its management to serve Him and our neighbor better (Piper, 2007).

Application. Expenditures must support our capacity to serve others. Stewardship covers all decisions that directly affect our physical and mental health: diet, physical activity, rest, self-care, and learning. It protects us from body idolatry and servitude to an unattainable ideal of beauty (Colossians 2:23).

The Danger. Debt for the obsession with physical perfection is a form of slavery. In the United States, more than 100 million people are in debt due to medical bills or insurance denials (Levey & Satija, 2022). A wrong decision passes us from steward to slave—a debt that binds us to the world instead of setting us free for God's plan.

Pillar 2: Contentment and Moderation—Winning Freedom from the "Always More" Race

Contentment (positive state of satisfaction regardless of external possessions) (Philippians 4:11–13) and moderation (avoidance of excess) (Titus 2:12) are the antidote to chronic dissatisfaction fueled by wellness culture.

Application. Contentment is active gratitude that sets us free from the permanent need to possess to feel complete or fulfilled. It calls us to be a heart full of what we already

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have. Moderation is the will to avoid excess and the pointless accumulation of marginal products.

The Contentment Test. Is this purchase made from a place of gratitude for what I have or anxiety about what I do not have?

Expert Opinion. Pastor David Miller (2015) reminds us that "True flourishing is not found in the latest miracle pill or the trendy, exclusive diet, but in the contentment of the heart and the soul at peace with God," (p. 102).

Pillar 3: Wisdom and Discernment—Filtering the False Prophets of Wellness

Wisdom (practical judgment, proven by experience) and discernment (the capacity to make distinctions) (Carson, 1984) are two fundamental biblical virtues in the face of information asymmetry. The consumer must be critical, check their sources, beware of promises of miraculous and immediate results, and question a professional.

Application. Wisdom is the filter of veracity. It supposes a critical shifting of the product claims. A Christian consumer might ask themselves the following questions:

- Do I really need this expense to flourish?
- Is this promise of flourishing supported by recognized and solid scientific evidence, or is it, above all, emotional marketing?
- Does my purchase separate me from God and others or make me selfish?

Illustration (Training and Coaching). For certain complex purchases (coaching, real estate), wisdom consists of seeking the wise counsel of a reliable person and a collective vetting rather than only that of the seller's authority. This peer-based discernment protects us where individual research is powerless.

Pillar 4: Love for Neighbor—Making Consumption an Act of Justice

Love for neighbor (Matthew 22:39) requires that our choices have a collective scope. Personal flourishing cannot be dissociated from the flourishing of the community and creation (Genesis 2:15).

Application. Choosing fair trade products, being transparent about their supply chain, and guaranteeing social and environmental justice becomes an act of love. It means opting for ethically made sportswear that guarantees fair wages, environmentally friendly detergents, or organic and local foods, even if more expensive.

Illustration. A Christian consumer can choose to buy their sports clothing from a brand that guarantees fair-trade practices and fair wages all along the production line. Or they

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can favor an organic restaurant with a reasonable local sourcing policy. These decisions contribute to human and planetary flourishing.

Expert Opinion. Father Jean-Luc Dubois (2016) reminds us that "The well-being of our body is intrinsically linked to that of our community and the planet in which we live. Personal flourishing must never be bought at the price of injustice to others" (p. 65).

Beyond Individual Choice: Practical Advice for a Flourishing Life

How can we apply these principles every day when facing tempting offers?

Define your deep "why": Are you moved by a true need for flourishing, by external constraints, or simply by the desire for a shortcut? Honest self-reflection is essential.

Do your research and compare it with discernment: Do not take the word of a brand or an influencer. Be a critical consumer in the service of your flourishing. Seek to verify recognized sources.

Opt for simple and moderate first: The simplest and least expensive solutions are often the most natural and lasting for flourishing (eating well, exercising, sleeping well). Multiplying products for only marginal benefits will eventually become a source of clutter and anxiety.

Think true cost and true impact: The ecological footprint and the cost to the community or future generations are often hidden. Choosing sustainable and ethical businesses is also an act of stewardship and contributes to a more just and collective flourishing.

Invest in relationships and service: Flourishing is inextricably linked to the quality of our relationships. Quality time with loved ones and community involvement are more important for health than a new fitness tracker. Service to others is a deep source of flourishing (Acts 20:35).

Practice contentment and gratitude: Be grateful for what you have. Cultivate thankfulness for the simple gifts of life. True flourishing comes from a state of mind and healthy life-giving relationships.

Seek spiritual discernment: Pray for wisdom in your consumption choices. Ask God for the grace to be a good steward, to be generous with your purchasing power, and to give a higher meaning to your life choices, to be able to flourish as much as possible, and bring Him glory.

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Conclusion: Towards Enlightened, Ethical, and Spiritual Consumption for Flourishing

The flourishing market, with its permanent cascade of promises and offerings, represents a major ethical and economic issue. Skillfully, it profits from our bounded rationality to monetize a deep spiritual aspiration. However, this challenge is also an opportunity. By applying a Christian perspective and turning consumption into an act of stewardship rather than a simple act of desire, we commit to the path of authentic flourishing.

Our four-pillar discernment framework—Stewardship, Contentment, Wisdom, and Love for Neighbor—equips consumers with concrete tools to deconstruct the marketing illusion and to align their purchasing choices with their deeper values. Faith transforms consumption from a source of anxiety and chronic dissatisfaction into a path towards freedom and contribution to the common good (Chester, 2013).

Breaking free from the always more cycle, the Christian consumer can redirect their purchasing power toward goods and services that contribute to lasting flourishing, that honor the body as a temple, and that serve the common good. Ultimately, true flourishing is not a commodity, but the fruit of an aligned, intentional, and generous life. These principles are necessary not only for individuals but for the building of a more ethical market and a more just society.

Act Today: The 3-Step Action Plan

1. **Ask yourself the deep "why":** Is my purchase motivated by a real need (Stewardship) or by fear and social pressure (Illusion)?
2. **Apply a discernment filter:** Before purchasing, make sure the product claim is supported by verified evidence (Wisdom) and is not a vague promise.
3. **Invest relationally:** Give priority to expenditures that support healthy relationships, service to others (Love for Neighbor), and gratitude (Contentment), because lasting flourishing is always found in connection, never in possession.

About the Author

Armel Kono is from Cameroon. He lives in Chesapeake, Virginia (USA) with his wife and four children. For over a decade, he has focused on organizational issues relating to management, marketing, strategy, distribution, business ethics, and organizational design. Drawing on his expertise in corporate culture and performance, Armel Kono has co-developed systems with various organizations to meet market demands, helping them achieve operational and ethical excellence.

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He is the founder of Hippomind, a marketing and strategy consulting firm. He also founded AurPur, a company whose core business is commercial and residential cleaning, with a green focus. Armel Kono has held strategic positions within multinationals based in Cameroon, his home country.

He holds two master's degrees, one in organizational management and the other in marketing strategy, from the Advanced School of Economics and Business at the University of Douala in Cameroon. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Business at the School of Business and Leadership (SBL) at Regent University in Virginia, USA. Armel Kono approaches problem-solving with a collaborative, critical, and systemic approach to understand the underlying mechanisms of organizational success.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Pierre Armel Kono Minkoulou, 2929 Fireside Rd., Apt. 2, Chesapeake, VA, 23324; Ph: 757-575-4169; Email: pierar1@mail.regent.edu or km.performances@gmail.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Opportunity Cost and Crowding Out the Food Supply

Jon M. Wallace
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

This article examines the utilization of farmland and inquires whether we are making the most informed choices regarding its use. It focuses on opportunity cost, which means that using land for one purpose—such as fuel or alcohol—means we cannot use it for another—such as growing food. Right now, vast amounts of land are used to grow crops for ethanol (a fuel additive), alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana, even though many people around the world do not have enough to eat. To carry out this study, I gathered data on the agricultural inputs required to produce one gallon of various alcohols and ethanol blends. This involved consulting recipe information, distilling guides, and technical production sources to determine the average number of pounds or bushels of crops, such as potatoes, corn, grapes, and barley, needed to convert into finished products. By establishing these input ratios, I created a baseline for estimating the land requirements for different categories of alcohol and fuel production. I then collected information on recent production volumes in both the United States and globally, drawing from agricultural reports, industry statistics, and government data. Using these figures, I calculated the acreage necessary to cultivate sufficient crops to meet current demand for vodka, whiskey, wine, beer, and ethanol. This methodology allowed me to translate production volumes into land-use estimates, highlighting the scale of farmland devoted to nonfood outputs. By combining input requirements with production statistics, the analysis provides a clear picture of the opportunity costs involved in allocating agricultural land to alcohol and fuel rather than food.

Keywords: crowding out, opportunity cost, food supply, ethanol, alcohol, agroeconomics

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Opportunity Cost and Crowding Out the Food Supply

The Moral Weight of Every Acre

Imagine standing in the middle of a vast field—soil rich, sun high, the hum of machinery in the distance. You might assume this land is growing food to feed families, stock pantries, or nourish communities. However, often, it is growing something else: corn for fuel, barley for beer, tobacco for cigarettes, or cannabis for getting high. This is not a failure of farming; it is a failure of priorities.

Modern agriculture produces plenty. However, much of what it produces does not feed people at all. From the soil to the silo, vast amounts of land, labor, and money are poured into industries that offer little or no nutritional value. Meanwhile, millions go undernourished, and food prices climb for those who can least afford them. We can quantify how many people can be fed by the number of acres diverted for uses other than agricultural food production. We can then calculate the typical food yield for this acreage.

This article is based on the idea of biblical stewardship, which teaches that land is a gift from God meant to care for creation and show His mercy. Using simple math and real-world data, it shows that if we used the land currently growing crops for E85 ethanol and beer to grow basic foods instead, we could feed over 1.4 billion people every year. The article also suggests changes in policy—such as shifting government subsidies, updating land-use rules, and offering better incentives for growing food rather than nonessential cash crops—emphasizing their economic value while underscoring their lack of necessity for basic nutrition. These ideas support a move toward farming that prioritizes feeding people and caring for the planet. It also includes practical steps that Christian families and churches can take to help reduce the impact of alcohol and E85 fuel use on food availability and prices. It ends by pointing to the Bible's call to use resources with compassion and care. Verses like Genesis 2:15, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it"; Isaiah 58:7, "Is it not to share your food with the hungry"; and Matthew 25:35, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat" remind us that how we use land is part of our Christian witness (*New International Version*, n.d.). This article offers a new way to think about farming—one grounded in justice, mercy, and the provision for others.

Methodology

Comparative Estimation Approach

This study employed a comparative estimation approach to evaluate the land required to produce alcohol and ethanol blends. The methodology was designed to quantify the

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opportunity cost of agricultural land devoted to nonfood outputs such as beer, wine, spirits, vodka, whiskey, and ethanol.

Identifying U.S. and Global Production Volumes

I began by identifying the total annual production volumes of beer, wine, vodka, whiskey, and ethanol in both the United States and globally. These figures were drawn from agricultural and industry reports, including statistical releases and land-use surveys from the *U.S. Department of Agriculture* (USDA; 2023, 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c), as well as international production data from the *International Organisation of Vine and Wine* (2024). Establishing these baseline volumes was essential for translating consumption into acreage requirements, since published data typically report overall crop acreage but not acreage devoted to specific products.

Determining Crop Input Requirements by Product

Next, I consulted technical recipes and production guides to determine the average crop input required per gallon of each product:

- Beer (barley): Conversion ratios for barley-to-beer were drawn from Montana State University's Mash Master Brewer Resources, which explains how malted barley starches are converted into fermentable sugars during mashing (Montana State University Barley Breeding Program, n.d.). Hop Growers of America (2023) was also consulted for beer production input requirements.
- Wine (grapes): Grape-to-wine conversion ratios were drawn from Crowe (2011), who provides specific estimates of the number of pounds of grapes required to produce one gallon of wine. To contextualize these ratios, WineMaker Magazine (n.d.) outlines the general winemaking process, explaining how grape sugars are converted into finished wine through fermentation. Together, these sources establish both the technical input requirements and the broader production framework necessary to estimate the land use devoted to wine.
- Vodka (potatoes): Potato-to-vodka conversion ratios were derived from DIY Distilling (2023), which outlines the mash and fermentation process for potato vodka, and supplemented by Mile Hi Distilling (2025), which provides a detailed potato mash recipe.
- Whiskey (corn): Coalition Brewing (n.d.) provides estimates of corn requirements for whiskey production, noting that approximately 8–10 pounds of corn are needed per gallon.
- Ethanol (corn): Shapouri et al. (2002) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture detail corn-to-ethanol conversion factors, offering a technical baseline for ethanol yield per bushel of corn. HowStuffWorks (2025) was also consulted to determine how much corn is required to make one gallon of ethanol.

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Although it is unusual for academic research to rely on recipe-based sources, this step was necessary to approximate the agricultural inputs underlying alcohol and ethanol production. Without these conversion ratios, it would not be possible to quantify the opportunity cost of land devoted to nonfood outputs.

Calculating Total Crop Inputs

Using these input ratios, I multiplied the total production volume in gallons of each product by the crop input per gallon to determine the total crop requirement for the U.S. and global markets. This calculation was performed for beer (barley), wine (grapes), whiskey (corn), vodka (potatoes), and ethanol (corn). Acreage estimates were then cross-referenced with USDA land-use reports and other agricultural statistics (USDA, 2023, 2024, 2025c; Ghosh, 2020). This step allowed me to translate crop inputs into acreage requirements, thereby quantifying the land devoted to alcohol and ethanol production (Karlsson, 2022).

U.S. and Global Acreage Estimates

The methodology accounted for both U.S. and global acreage devoted to alcohol and ethanol crops. In the United States, ethanol is produced primarily from corn, which has relatively high yields per acre. However, in other countries, ethanol is produced from crops such as sugarcane, cassava, or sorghum, which often require more land and produce lower ethanol yields per acre (Sandhu & Guilbert, 2017; Tuck et al., 2025). This shortcoming highlights that global acreage estimates may understate the opportunity cost, since non-corn ethanol crops are less efficient in terms of land use.

Estimating Opportunity Costs

To assess the opportunity cost of this land use, I calculated how much food could theoretically be produced if the same acreage were devoted to staple food crops rather than nonfood and non-feed agricultural products. Using standard yield and caloric conversion data, I estimated the total potential kilocalories that could be generated annually from this land. I then divided this figure by 1,800 calories per day to estimate the number of people who could be fed per year. These calculations were performed for both U.S. and global production volumes.

This methodology highlights the crowding out effect: high-margin alcohol products displace lower-margin food crops, exacerbating food insecurity. As Restaurantware (2025) and Patel (2025) note, alcohol consistently yields higher profit margins than food products derived from the same primary ingredients. Relief food, by contrast, is extremely low margin compared to even basic groceries, underscoring the economic disincentive to prioritize food production for vulnerable populations.

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It is important to emphasize that these figures are estimates rather than precise measurements, intended to illustrate the scale of land use trade-offs and the potential foregone meals that represent an opportunity cost in feeding the hungry.

Moral Question Pertaining to Land Use

In this context, every acre becomes a moral question: Are we cultivating compassion—or crowding it out? The Bible does not treat land as neutral. It treats land as sacred—a gift entrusted to humanity, not for exploitation but for care. Genesis 2:15 calls us to "tend and keep" the garden. Leviticus 25:4 reminds us that even the land itself deserves rest. Moreover, Isaiah 58:7 asks plainly: "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry?" (*New International Version*, n.d.). "For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink" (*New King James Version* [*NKJV*], 1982, Matthew 25:35).

When farmland is used to grow crops for alcohol, tobacco, and fuel—while millions remain malnourished—we must ask whether we are truly honoring God's call to stewardship. Because every field holds more than crops, it (a) holds choices, (b) holds consequences, and (c) holds the potential to reflect the mercy and justice of the Kingdom of God. When agricultural inputs are diverted toward alcohol, tobacco, and fuel—while millions remain malnourished—we must ask whether we are honoring God's call to stewardship. Proverbs 3:9 called us to "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the first fruits of all your increase," and Isaiah 58:7 declared that true worship is "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out?" (*NKJV*, 1982). These texts remind us that every bushel of corn or acre of barley holds sacred potential: to nourish, to sustain, to reflect the bounty of God toward others.

To better understand the scope of food insecurity and hunger, both domestically and globally, the following table presents key statistics from leading governmental and humanitarian sources. These figures highlight the persistent and disproportionate impact of food scarcity across various regions and populations.

Table 1: 2025 Food Insecurity and Hunger Statistics: United States and Global Overview

Category	Statistic	Source
U.S. food insecurity in 2023	13.5% of households (18 million) experienced food insecurity	U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] (2025a) and USDA, Economic Research Service (2025)

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Category	Statistic	Source
U.S. child food insecurity	17.9% of households with children were food insecure	USDA (2025a)
U.S. very low food security	5.1% of households (6.8 million) had disrupted eating patterns	USDA (2025a)
U.S. total food-insecure people	47.4 million individuals	Feeding America (2025)
Global hunger in 2025	733 million people go hungry daily	Concern Worldwide US (2025)
Global malnutrition deaths	9 million deaths annually from hunger-related causes	Concern Worldwide US (2025)
Global famine conditions	1.33 million people experiencing famine or famine-like conditions	Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide (2025)
Sudan in 2025	Famine confirmed in multiple regions	Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide (2025) and World Food Programme (2025)
Gaza Strip in 2025	500,000 people at risk of famine	Gustafson and Vos (2025), IPC Famine Review Committee (2025), and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Global Partners (2025)
Global food insecurity in 2024	295.3 million people in 53 countries faced acute food insecurity	Gustafson and Vos (2025) and International Food Policy Research Institute (2025)

The Hidden Cost of Consumption: Rethinking Land Use Through the Economics of Opportunity Costs

Food scarcity is not merely a matter of how much land we farm—it is about what that land is used for. Economists frame this dilemma through the lens of opportunity cost—the benefit forgone when a resource is committed to one use over another. Closely tied to this is the phenomenon of crowding out, in which non-nutritional sectors displace food production and inflate global hunger. The cultivation of luxury crops for nonessential products such as beer, wine, alcohol, tobacco, and E85 ethanol consumes

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hundreds of millions of acres globally, diverting agricultural inputs that could otherwise sustain communities (Roberts, 2021; Tilman et al., 2002). It is not just the consumption of one individual that affects producers' decision-making; it is millions of consumers buying millions of gallons of whiskey, vodka, beer, and ethanol that dramatically affects food scarcity and prices.

Ethanol is among the most striking examples. The United States annually diverts over 15 billion gallons worth of corn to fuel rather than food (Renewable Fuels Association, 2023). That represents nearly 300 million bushels—enough caloric energy to feed hundreds of millions of people per year (S. Li et al., 2024; Searchinger et al., 2008). This diversion is equal to 40% of the annual U.S. corn harvest. Simultaneously, alcohol production drives up the cost of corn, sugar, and barley, distorting food markets through direct competition for inputs. Andreyeva et al. (2010) found that food demand remains inelastic even as prices rise, meaning that the poor suffer disproportionately when nonfood sectors crowd out supply. In other words, inelastic products like food are ones you still have to buy even if food prices are driven up by acreage devoted to alcohol and ethanol.

Blecher and Bertram (2020) argued that tobacco cultivation often displaces food crops, exacerbating food insecurity in low-income regions where arable land is scarce and agricultural labor is limited. This dynamic reinforces the ethical tension between discretionary land use and the imperative to nourish vulnerable populations (Blecher & Bertram, 2020).

Beyond land and price, there is an ecological toll. Water for distilling spirits and brewing beer, fertilizer for tobacco, fuel for barley: each input amplifies environmental stress in regions already facing scarcity. Where urban density or drought challenges traditional agriculture, civil engineering can unlock solutions—such as vertical farming in tower-based systems that mimic ancient agricultural engineering wisdom. Vertical farming is highly efficient. It saves water and land. However, these innovations often require financial engineering before civil engineering. "Seed capital" for microfinance, public investment, or philanthropic capital that bridges the gap between aspiration and implementation is needed to get projects moving (Foley et al., 2011; Mora et al., 2020).

In 2024, more than 295 million people across 53 countries faced acute food insecurity, marking the sixth consecutive year of rising global hunger (Gustafson & Vos, 2025). Of these, nearly 1.9 million individuals were experiencing catastrophic conditions consistent with famine, including confirmed cases in Sudan and imminent risk in Gaza (World Food Programme, 2025). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2025) further reported that 37.7 million children under five suffered from acute malnutrition in 26 crisis-affected countries, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated global action.

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Opportunity Cost, Elasticity, and Crowding Out in Economics

Opportunity cost is a foundational concept in economics. It refers to the value of the next-best alternative forgone when a choice is made (Spiller, 2011; von Wieser, 1927/1914). Whether deciding how to spend money, allocate land, or invest time, individuals and societies regularly face trade-offs.

In consumer choice theory, people aim to maximize satisfaction—referred to as utility—despite limited resources such as money and time. For instance, choosing to purchase ethanol-blended fuel (E85) rather than regular gasoline involves giving up whatever else could have been bought with that money. This trade-off represents the opportunity cost. Everyday expressions like "time is money" reflect how frequently people make such decisions, even outside of economic contexts.

Although economists expect consumers to consider opportunity costs in decision-making, research shows that individuals often overlook them unless explicitly reminded. This tendency can lead to poor choices, especially in markets with limited alternatives (Frederick et al., 2009; Maguire et al., 2023).

Elasticity further enhances the understanding of consumer behavior. It measures how demand responds to price changes. Products are considered elastic if a small price increase leads to a significant drop in demand. For example, higher movie ticket prices may prompt consumers to stay home or opt for cheaper showtimes, such as matinees. Similarly, rising prices for brand-name snacks may cause buyers to switch to generic versions. Conversely, inelastic goods are those for which demand remains relatively unchanged despite price fluctuations. Gasoline and prescription medications are typical examples—consumers often continue purchasing them because they are essential.

Beyond individual behavior, opportunity cost also operates at the societal level through the concept of crowding out. This occurs when limited resources—such as land, labor, or capital—are dedicated to one use at the expense of another. For example, allocating farmland to grow corn for biofuel production reduces the land available for food crops, impacting supply chains and increasing food prices (Mankiw, 2020). Similarly, directing public funds toward biofuel initiatives might crowd out investments in healthcare or social services (Krugman & Wells, 2018). Taken together, opportunity cost, elasticity, and crowding out offer important insights into how choices—both personal and policy-driven—affect resource distribution. These concepts help individuals, businesses, and governments make more informed decisions that better balance economic efficiency with social well-being.

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Producer Crop Choices and Consumer Food Price Impacts

Luxury crops are crops used to produce nonessential products. Corn can be eaten, refined into ethanol, or used to make sour mash whiskey. The nonessential uses make that amount of corn a luxury crop. Producers respond to market signals (price and profits) by allocating land and resources toward luxury crops with higher margins—such as ethanol corn, wine grapes, or tobacco—rather than staple food crops. This behavior reflects rational economic incentives but introduces systemic trade-offs. When land is diverted from food production to non-nutritional outputs, the opportunity cost manifests in reduced caloric availability and increased food prices (Blecher & Bertram, 2020; Searchinger et al., 2008).

Higher margin crops often benefit from subsidies or strong market demand, incentivizing producers to prioritize them. This reallocation can crowd out food crops, especially in regions with limited arable land. As the supply of staple foods tightens, prices rise—disproportionately affecting low-income consumers and amplifying food insecurity (Nguyen et al., 2024).

The Ideas of Consumer Choice and Elasticity

Consumer choice theory states that when prices rise, people usually buy less of that product. However, this depends on elasticity, which is how sensitive people are to price changes. In low-elasticity markets—such as basic foods like cooking oil, cornmeal, rice, and beans—people continue to buy even when prices rise. These are everyday essentials, so most families, especially low-income ones, do not have a choice. They need these foods no matter what, so price increases make life more difficult. On the other hand, products like alcoholic drinks are highly elastic. If prices go up, people often cut back or stop buying them. These are not necessities, so it is easier to walk away. Granted, some nonessential products like tobacco and alcohol are addictive to most people, and they continue to buy these products despite price hikes. The difference in elasticity between luxury crops and food crops poses a problem. When farmers grow crops for luxury items rather than basic food, it can make healthy food more difficult to obtain and increase inequality in society (Mankiw, 2020).

The opportunity cost models presented here illuminate how different products consume resources and displace food. While whiskey, wine, and vodka register modest footprints, beer—produced on over 50 million acres globally—could feed more than 170 million people annually if its land were redirected to staple crops. And E85 ethanol, a fuel additive, stands alone in its magnitude; with caloric input sufficient to nourish over 1.4 billion people worldwide, it represents one of the greatest resource misallocations in agriculture today (OECD, 2024).

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Policy reform is essential. Ethanol and tobacco subsidies distort market signals and reward calorically inefficient production. Redirecting these subsidies toward agroecological transition and nutritional yield incentives could reshape our agricultural priorities. Tools such as land zoning, farm bill reform, and opportunity cost modeling offer pathways toward more equitable, sustainable food systems.

A 7% tax on global consumption of all fuel ethanol (E10, E15, and E85 blends are used in different parts of the world) and beer—without repurposing any agricultural land—could generate approximately $24.3 billion annually based on current market values (Grand View Research, 2024a, 2024b; OECD, 2024). With beer consumption at roughly 50–55 billion gallons and E85 ethanol at 28–31 billion gallons worldwide, and average prices of $6 (beer) per gallon and $1.50 (wholesale Ethanol) per gallon, the combined taxable market exceeds $349 billion. At a modest meal cost of $0.59, this tax revenue could purchase approximately 41 billion meals, which would provide nearly 37.6 million people with three meals a day for a full year. These meals could consist of corn, grains, beans, and soy. This model highlights the humanitarian potential of the sin tax coupled with a modest ethanol tax. This requires a better measure of economic efficiency and ethical stewardship.

From a Christian perspective, land is a sacred trust from the Creator for humanity's stewardship, not extraction. “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it” (*NKJV*, 1982, Genesis 2:15). Our choices in how we use the earth reflect our values and our worship. Each acre can bear witness—either to consumption that depletes or to cultivation that blesses.

Let our agricultural policies, like our lives, honor God through mercy and provision. As Proverbs 14:31 declared, “He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who honors Him has mercy on the needy” (*NKJV*, 1982). Moreover, may the final measure of our economics be the measure Jesus gave: “For I was hungry, and you gave Me food” (*NKJV*, 1982, Matthew 25:35).

Understanding Supply and Demand of Low-Margin and High-Volume Products (e.g., E85)

Products like E85 ethanol are typically low-margin but produced in large volumes due to policy mandates (e.g., the Renewable Fuel Standard) and infrastructure investments. From a supply and demand perspective:

- **supply side**: Large-scale production of E85 increases availability, but its low energy density and limited fueling infrastructure constrain consumer uptake. Producers may continue supplying E85 due to regulatory incentives (J. Li & Stock, 2019).

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- **demand side**: Consumer choice is sensitive to price differentials and fuel availability. Studies have shown that E85 demand is highly elastic—motorists will only choose E85 if it is significantly cheaper than gasoline on an energy-equivalent basis (Liao, 2016; Liu & Greene, 2014). When E85 is priced competitively, demand rises; when it is not, consumers revert to gasoline.

This dynamic illustrates how opportunity cost influences consumer behavior: if the perceived benefit of E85 (e.g., lower cost, environmental impact) outweighs the forgone utility of gasoline, consumers will switch. However, if E85 is not sufficiently discounted or accessible, its demand remains suppressed despite the high supply. Therefore, an E85 tax would reduce E85 demand based on the price elasticity of demand.

Opportunity Cost Applied

Opportunity cost explains why we cannot "have it all"—a principle that manifests directly in agricultural land use decisions. When land is allocated to ethanol production, such as E85, it cannot be used to grow food crops. The cost is not merely theoretical; it is measured in calories, protein, and meals not produced. It also explains why people are not fed. In both public policy and personal budgeting, recognizing these trade-offs fosters more transparent and morally accountable choices (Mankiw, 2020).

In agriculture, opportunity cost becomes critical when land is diverted from food and feed crops to non-nutritional outputs such as alcohol, tobacco, ethanol, and marijuana. This reallocation reduces not only food quantity and quality, but also social utility, particularly in regions facing caloric scarcity. Crowding out occurs as finite resources are absorbed by competing uses, with ethanol demand displacing staple crops and contributing to supply constraints. These constraints drive up prices for feed grains, leading to cost inflation across livestock products and broader food categories (Riera-Prunera, 2024).

Ethical Stewardship and Opportunity Cost

From a theological and ethical perspective, the diversion of arable land toward non-nutritional outputs—such as beer, wine, spirits, marijuana, and fuel—raises serious concerns about efficiency, equity, and moral responsibility. This allocation reflects more than economic trade-offs; it represents a forfeiture of nourishment, intensifying global disparities in caloric availability and food security. Within a stewardship-oriented theological framework, such land use decisions may conflict with biblical principles of creation care, justice, and mercy. As Scripture taught, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (*NKJV*, 1982, Psalm 24:1), reminding us that every resource entrusted to human hands carries an obligation to honor God's purposes. Opportunity cost, in this context, transcends market calculus—it invites spiritual discernment about whether our agricultural choices serve to provide, protect, and uplift the most vulnerable.

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Table 2 shows the profit incentive that producers receive by producing alcohol instead of food. The profit margin is calculated using the cost, the overhead cost and the retail price. Crowding out of land for food production occurs because of these incentives. Among these product categories, alcohol has profit margins between 55% and 70%, and food has profit margins between 30% and 45%. Crowding out based on the profitability of alcohol with respect to food also makes food more expensive for consumers.

Table 2: Comparison of Alcohol and Food Profit Margins

Product	Retail price	Estimated cost	Profit margin (%)	Primary ingredient
Whiskey (750 ml)	$40.00	$10.00	60–70	Corn
Tortillas (12-pack)	$3.00	$1.50	40–45	Corn
Merlot (750 ml)	$20.00	$7.00	55–65	Grapes
Fresh grapes (per lb)	$3.00	$1.80	30–35	Grapes
Vodka (750 ml bottle)	$30.00	$10.00	60–70	Potatoes
Idahoan mashed potatoes (4 oz pouch)	$1.75	$0.80	35–45	Potatoes

Note. Alcohol products consistently show higher profit margins than food products made from the same primary ingredients. These economic incentives contribute to crowding out, where agricultural resources are shifted toward alcohol production at the expense of food availability. Data obtained from Hines (2023), Patel (2025), Restaurantware (2025), and USDA (2025b).

Arable Land Use

Let us review the basic breakdown of how arable land is used in the United States and globally, as shown in Figures 1–2. We follow this up with graphs showing land use and opportunity cost with respect to the potential number of people that can be fed. See Appendices A and B for tabular information regarding land use and opportunity cost in the United States and globally.

Of the 390 million acres of arable land available in the United States, approximately 206 million acres—over 52%—are committed to agricultural uses that include both nutritional and discretionary outputs. US Feed crops dominate the allocation at 90 million acres, followed by US food crops at 60 million acres. Discretionary sectors reveal notable footprints: E85 ethanol occupies 33.5 million acres, while alcohol crops collectively occupy 21 million acres across beer, wine, and spirits. Additional acreage is used for sugar (1.2 million acres) and tobacco (170,000 acres). The remaining 184.1 million acres represent land that is either fallow, in rotation, or designated for future

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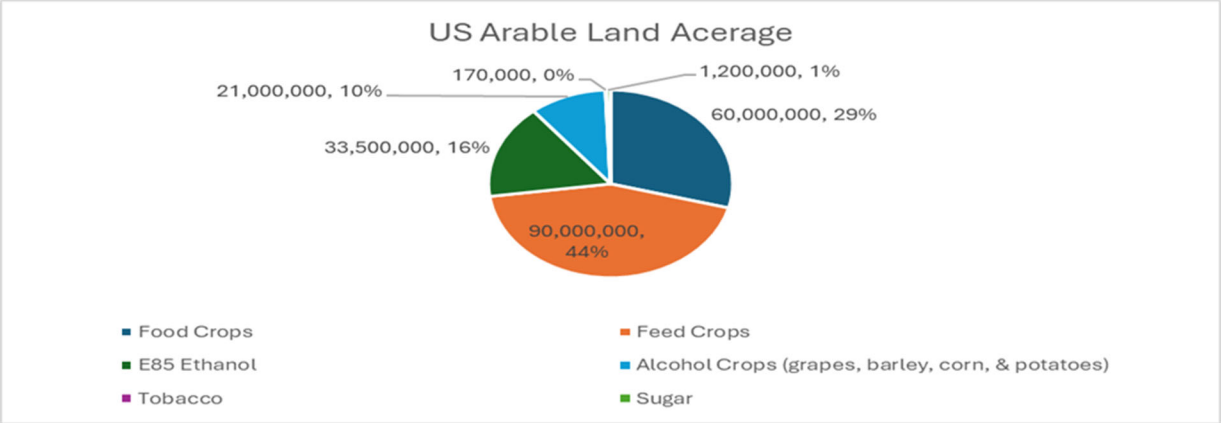
agricultural expansion, offering potential for more ethical or food-directed use. Examination of the graph shows E85 and alcohol take up 53.6 million acres compared to 60 million acres for food crops in the United States.

Figure 1: U.S. Arable Land Allocation



Note. Data obtained from Ghosh (2020), Merrill and Leatherby (2018), and USDA (2024, 2025c).

Globally, arable land reaches 3.41 billion acres, with 3.085 billion already committed—nearly 90% of all usable land. The most significant uses are feed crops at 1.4 billion acres and food crops at 1.1 billion acres, which together comprise the backbone of global agricultural production. However, discretionary consumption commands significant space: E85 ethanol production claims 100–120 million acres, alcohol crops take up 70 million acres, sugar crops consume 200 million acres, and tobacco adds another 15 million acres. These sectors together absorb nearly 18% of committed land, raising critical questions about opportunity cost and stewardship. With only 325 million acres of arable land uncommitted worldwide, Figure 2 illustrates how profoundly global agriculture is embedded in systems that may not directly serve food security.

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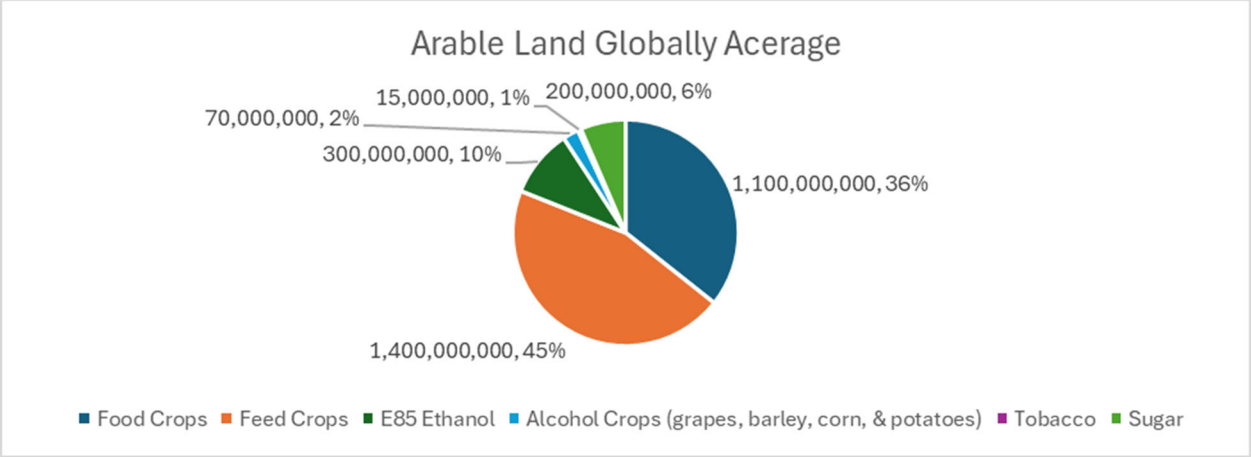
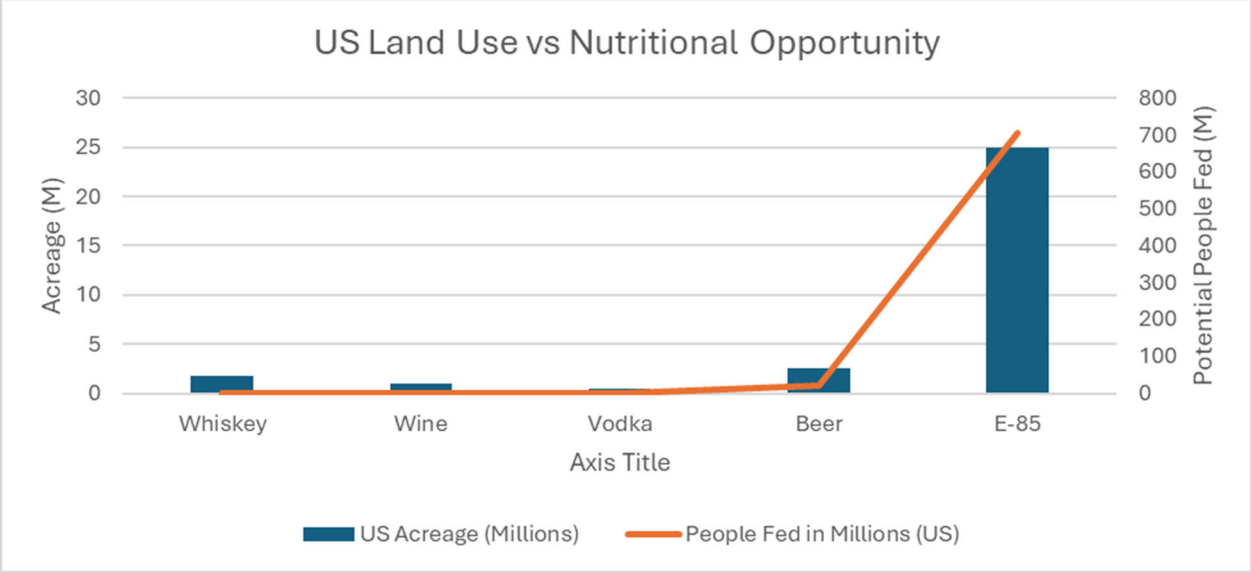
Figure 2: Global Arable Land Allocation



Note. Data obtained from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2022, 2024), Ghosh (2020), Our World in Data (2024), and World Population Review (2025).0

Figure 3: U.S. Land Use, Caloric Yield, and Nutritional Opportunity by Product



Note. U.S. and global acreage estimates adapted from Emler (2025), Grand View Research (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), International Organisation of Vine and Wine (2024), Lee-Weitz (2022), Tse (2024), USDA (2023), Wilson (2018), and WineAmerica (2019). Caloric yield and opportunity cost estimates based on Roberts (2021) and Trostle et al. (2011). Vodka acreage approximated using production volume and grain sourcing data. See Tables A1, A2, and A3 for information about land use and opportunity cost.

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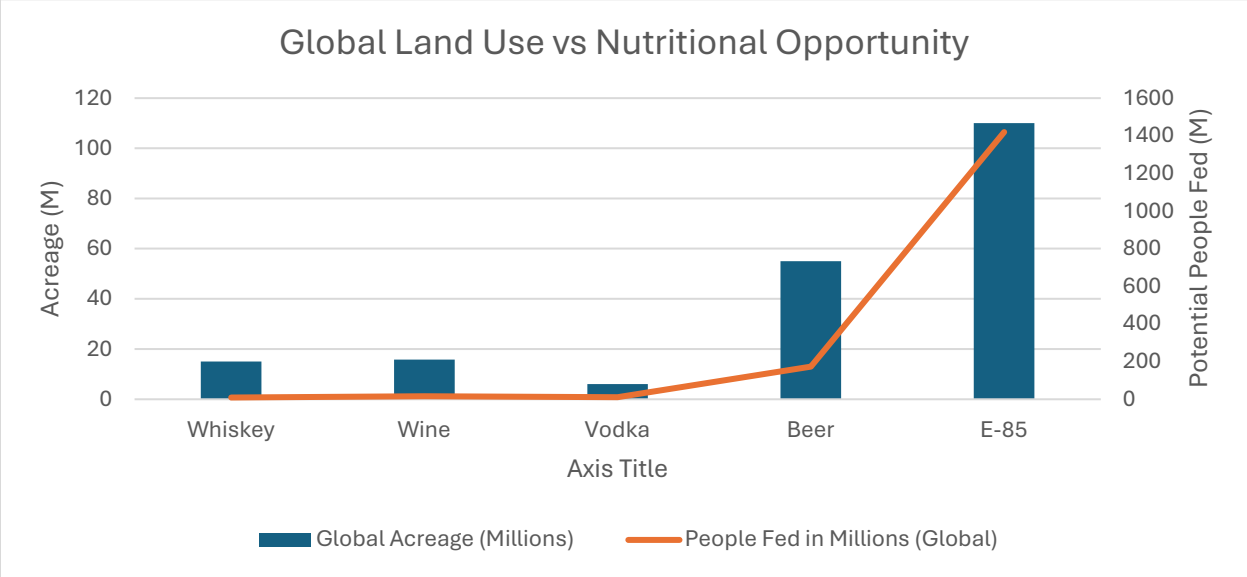
Figure 4: Global Land Use, Caloric Yield, and Nutritional Opportunity by Product



Note. U.S. and global acreage estimates adapted from Emler (2025), Grand View Research (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), International Organisation of Vine and Wine (2024), Lee-Weitz (2022), Tse (2024), USDA (2023), Wilson (2018), and WineAmerica (2019). Caloric yield and opportunity cost estimates based on Roberts (2021) and Trostle et al. (2011). Vodka acreage approximated using production volume and grain sourcing data. See Tables A1, A2, and A3 for information about land use and opportunity cost.

The following are additional notes for Figures 3 and 4:

- The number of people fed is derived using 657,000 kcal/person per year (based on a 1,800 kcal/day diet).
- E85 delivers zero nutritional value despite massive caloric input, making its opportunity cost the highest.
- These figures illustrate land use diversion from direct nutritional provisioning to alcohol and fuel commodity production.
- Calorie estimates are derived from crop input weights per gallon of product scaled by product volume.
- Beer production uses land capable of feeding over 170 million people worldwide.

In the United States, roughly 31.8 million acres are devoted to the production of alcoholic beverages and E85 ethanol fuel. Globally, this land use expands to an estimated 183–220 million acres. These crops—including corn for ethanol and whiskey, barley for beer, grapes for wine, and sugarcane for spirits—consume vast agricultural space that could otherwise support staple food production. The opportunity cost of this allocation is substantial when measured by caloric yield. Based on average caloric

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outputs per acre—ranging from 344,000 kcal for whiskey to 18.6 million kcal for E85 ethanol—the redirected total represents enough energy to feed approximately 732 million people annually in the United States and over 1.42 billion people globally, assuming a nutritional requirement of 657,000 kcal per person per year (based on a 1,800 kcal/day diet). This misallocation of land reflects both economic inefficiency and moral urgency, as non-nutritional sectors continuously absorb high-yield acreage while hunger persists worldwide. The crowding out of food-grade crops results not only in reduced supply and heightened prices but also in a lost opportunity.

Understanding Biofuel Demand

Bruce Babcock (2013) studied how government rules requiring more biofuel—such as corn-based ethanol—can affect corn prices. He found that if the United States increases how much ethanol it uses, corn prices could go up by about 5–6%, or around 25 cents more per bushel (a bushel is a way to measure crops, a unit of dry volume used in the United States and the United Kingdom, equal to 8 gallons or about 35.24 liters U.S.). This matters to farmers and food producers, but Babcock said we should also consider broader goals, such as energy independence and environmental protection.

Bento et al. (2017, as cited in O'Malley & Searle, 2021) showed that ethanol demand could raise corn prices by as much as 24.5%. That is a much bigger increase, and it shows how different studies can yield different results depending on what they assume—such as how much land is used, how flexible people are with prices (elasticity), and how global markets react. Together, these studies show that making rules about biofuel is not simple. Leaders need to consider both minor effects in the United States and larger effects worldwide before making decisions.

Key Takeaways

These trade-offs are not merely theoretical—they reflect realities in agricultural systems where millions go hungry while vast acreage supports products that offer little or no nutritional value. Whether land is used for ethanol, alcohol, marijuana, or tobacco, the opportunity cost remains significant. Each acre redirected away from food crops carries consequences for global caloric availability, ecological health, and economic equity. E85 ethanol, for example, provides modest environmental gains and supports domestic industry, yet it diverts nutrient-rich corn from the food supply on a staggering scale. While such fuels may aid energy independence, their full costs must be weighed against the ethical imperative to feed the hungry. The full cost is not realized without considering the opportunity cost of ethanol, alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana.

Scripture speaks directly about this tension. Psalm 24:1 affirmed, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (*NKJV*, 1982), reminding us that every field and crop is entrusted to us for God's purposes—not for unchecked consumption or profit. Romans

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14:17 recentered priorities around "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (*NKJV*, 1982), calling believers beyond transactional economics toward sacrificial stewardship. In this light, Christians who partake in wine, whiskey, beer, or vodka might prayerfully consider redirecting a portion of their discretionary spending—perhaps the cost of one or several bottles per month—to purchase food for donation to a local pantry or shelter.

Areas for Further Inquiry

My research primarily engaged with positive economics, analyzing how the prioritization of cash crops affects food supply and contributes to hunger. This approach focused on observable economic relationships and outcomes. However, food insecurity also has profound normative dimensions—impacting human development, health, and mental well-being—which raise questions about what policies should be implemented to improve societal welfare. Future inquiry could extend into psychology, public health, and sociology, as well as policy studies aimed at evaluating and recommending government interventions to address these broader consequences.

Calls to Action

Redirect discretionary spending. Encourage individuals and households in your church family to reallocate their alcohol consumption budgets toward direct food donations to local pantries and shelters. This is a call to discipleship and to show love for your neighbors.

Volunteer regularly. Establish the practice of hands-on service by committing one half-day of volunteer work each month or quarter at a food bank, soup kitchen, or nutritional outreach ministry. Work as a church community to coordinate your efforts so these service organizations have adequate volunteer coverage. Also, consider church action, such as food drives, to stamp out hunger.

Advocate for policy reform. Support public campaigns aimed at redirecting agricultural subsidies from ethanol and tobacco toward staple crop production, agroecological transition, and nutritional equity. Encourage the legislature to impose sin taxes on the production and consumption of alcohol products.

Educate the church on stewardship economics. Host workshops, sermons, or roundtables focused on the opportunity cost of land use and biblical principles of provisioning, with a call to rethink discretionary consumption through the lens of mercy.

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Cultivate ethical consumption habits. Inspire believers to practice sacrificial stewardship by reducing their intake of products derived from high-opportunity-cost crops and using those funds to support food justice initiatives.

Support reputable Christian charities supporting food aid. Several well-established Christian organizations accept monetary donations specifically for food assistance and hunger relief. These charities combine faith-based missions with transparent, effective service delivery:

Samaritan's Purse: A nondenominational evangelical organization known for disaster relief and food distribution programs worldwide. Their feeding programs target vulnerable communities with both emergency and long-term support.

Compassion International: Focused on child development, Compassion provides food aid as part of its holistic care model for children living in poverty. Donations help fund nutrition programs in over 25 countries.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS): CRS operates food security and agricultural development programs across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They partner with local communities to address both immediate hunger and long-term sustainability.

Food for the Poor: One of the largest international relief organizations in the United States, Food for the Poor delivers food, clean water, and housing to impoverished families in the Caribbean and Latin America.

World Vision: A Christian humanitarian organization that tackles hunger through emergency food aid, school feeding programs, and agricultural training. Donations support their global hunger initiatives.

Lutheran World Relief: This organization provides food assistance and resilience-building programs in disaster-prone regions. Their work is rooted in Lutheran theology and global development expertise.

Operation Blessing: Founded by Pat Robertson in 1978, Operation Blessing is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to alleviating hunger and suffering worldwide. Through its hunger relief programs, Operation Blessing distributes millions of pounds of food annually to families in need across the United States and in more than 90 countries. In addition to emergency food aid, the organization invests in long-term solutions, including clean water projects, medical care, and community development initiatives. Donations directly support their mission to provide both immediate relief and sustainable pathways out of poverty.

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These calls to action are more than isolated gestures; they are part of a long-term vision for a just and sustainable food system shaped by biblical principles of generosity, stewardship, and care for the vulnerable. Each donation reflects a commitment to equitable resource sharing and the pursuit of righteousness in economic life. Rooted in scriptures like Isaiah 58 and Matthew 25, these efforts champion both immediate relief and structural transformation. By partnering with trusted faith-based organizations, donors participate in redemptive work that values both body and soul. Together, such giving advances not only hunger relief but a gospel-centered ethic of abundance and justice. Finally, pray about the best course of action for you and your family to help address food security issues.

Choosing Mercy Over Margin

Crowding out by alcohol and ethanol crop producers makes food more expensive and increases the cost of feeding the poor and hungry around the world.

1. When people buy alcohol, they create demand for crops used to make it. Since alcohol has a higher profit margin than food, this encourages producers to grow crops for alcohol instead of food.
2. When fewer acres of land are used to grow food, the supply goes down. According to supply and demand, a lower supply leads to higher prices for everyone.
3. People who care about nutrition face limits because of what other consumers choose. Companies often choose to produce alcohol (high profit) or ethanol (high demand) rather than basic food crops. This drives up prices for food and livestock feed, making it harder for everyone to afford.
4. In this system, it is not just about individual choices. What others choose—and what companies are motivated to produce—affects everyone's access to healthy food. Utility is not only about income and preferences; market forces and profit margins shape it.

Choosing not to use alcohol or ethanol—even occasionally—is not a matter of legalism or personal restriction. It is an expression of care. When someone decides to abstain and uses that time or energy to serve others, such as volunteering at a food bank, it reflects a practical commitment to helping those in need. Believers who offer both resources and personal presence demonstrate the Gospel's call to serve. As Matthew 25:35 said, "For I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink" (*NKJV*, 1982).

In the end, economic choices about land use should be made not just for profit but for purpose. Opportunity cost is not just what we give up; it is what we could give forward. Donating to Christian charities is not only kind—it is strategic. It supports a

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bigger vision of fairness, stewardship, and care rooted in Scripture. That vision includes feeding more people by reclaiming land currently used for E85 fuel, alcohol, and marijuana crops. Redirecting resources toward growing food honors the call to feed the hungry (Isaiah 58; Matthew 25) and builds stronger, more just communities.

About the Author

Jon Michael Wallace earned his AACSB Accredited Global MBA from the University of Texas at Dallas Jindal School of Management in 2007. He served in the U.S. Military Special Operations Forces Community, where he developed expertise in lifesaving, Signals, Ordnance, and CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) Defense. Wallace later applied these skills as a radiation protection officer within the Special Warfare Community. After leaving the U.S. Military, he leveraged his education and experience into a career as an operations officer with the U.S. Government in counterproliferation and counterterrorism.

His professional career path has also included work in government contracting (procurement), retail merchandising, and motorcycle loan underwriting. Currently, Wallace works as an independent consultant, leveraging his broad experience in foreign affairs, special operations, strategy, intelligence, and global security. Guided by his Christian faith, he views his professional and academic pursuits as part of a larger calling to stewardship and service.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jon M. Wallace, 405 N. 27th Street, Fort Pierce, FL 34947, JonWal1@mail.regent.edu.

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Appendix A: Acreage, Caloric Output, and Crop Yields

Table A1: Land Use and Caloric Input

Food system use	Total acreage (U.S.)	Estimated caloric output	Notes
Food crops (grains, vegetables)	125–130 million	2.5–2.7 quadrillion kcal	Includes corn, wheat, soy, and produce
Livestock ranching (meat/dairy)	150–160 million	1.2–1.3 quadrillion kcal	Includes pasture and forage
Livestock feed crops (nonfood use only)	95–100 million	800 trillion kcal	

Note. Acreage and caloric output estimates adapted from Ghosh (2020), Irwin (2025), USDA (2025b, 2025c), and Zain (2023). Figures reflect U.S. land use for food crops, livestock ranching, and livestock feed production. Caloric outputs based on average crop and livestock conversion yields from USDA and industry sources. Ranges represent upper- and lower-bound variation by source and year.

Table A1 outlines how agricultural land in the United States is distributed among different food system uses and the estimated caloric output associated with each category. Food crops such as grains, vegetables, and staples occupy roughly 125–130 million acres and yield the highest caloric output, estimated at 2.5-2.7 quadrillion kilocalories. Livestock ranching, which includes both meat and dairy production through pasture and forage use, accounts for 150–160 million acres and produces approximately 1.2–1.3 quadrillion kilocalories. Crops grown for feed and nonfood purposes—such as those used for ethanol, industrial livestock feed, or other diversionary outputs—utilize 95–100 million acres and contribute about 800 trillion kilocalories. These data highlight both the efficiency and opportunity cost involved in land allocation decisions across the U.S. food system. Additional notes include the following:

- Food system acreage includes cropland for direct consumption, ranching for meat and dairy, and feed crop acreage.
- Caloric estimates derived from USDA crop yield data, livestock conversion rates, and feed energy coefficients (Babcock, 2013; Trostle et al., 2011).

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Table A2: Total Acres and Caloric Output by Product Category (U.S. Estimates)

Product category	Total acreage (U.S.)	Total calories (U.S.)
E85 ethanol fuel	28–31 million	465 trillion kcal
Beer	2.5 million	13.5 trillion kcal
Wine	1 million	1.08 trillion kcal
Vodka	0.5 million	720 billion kcal
Whiskey	1.8 million	620 billion kcal
Total alcohol and fuel	31–36.8 million	480–481 trillion kcal

Note. Acreage estimates adapted from Emler (2025), Grand View Research (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), International Organisation of Vine and Wine (2024), Karlsson (2022), Tse (2024), USDA (2025c), Wilson (2018), and WineAmerica (2019). Caloric output calculations informed by Roberts (2021), Trostle et al. (2011), and industry yield data.

These data summarize the estimated acreage and caloric yield of U.S. crops designated for alcohol production and E85 ethanol fuel. Collectively, these products occupy between 31 and 36.8 million acres of farmland and generate roughly 480–481 trillion kilocalories. The largest share is allocated to ethanol fuel, which alone requires 28–31 million acres and yields approximately 465 trillion kilocalories—dwarfing the output of alcohol categories like beer, wine, vodka, and whiskey. Beer accounts for 2.5 million acres and produces 13.5 trillion kilocalories, while the remaining spirits use smaller acreages and result in notably lower caloric returns. This highlights the disproportionate share of land dedicated to nonessential, high-margin products, raising questions about resource allocation and the opportunity cost of diverting agricultural capacity from staple food production.

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Table A3: Land Use, Caloric Yield, and Nutritional Opportunity by Product

Product	Total acreage (U.S.)	Total acreage (global)	Calories per acre	Opportunity cost in people fed U.S. / global
Whiskey	1.8 million	15 million	344,000 kcal	941,000 /8.8 million
Wine	1 million	13.5–18 million	1.08 million kcal	1.42 million /15.9 million
Vodka	0.5 million	5–7 million	1.44 million kcal	1.1 million /10.1 million
Beer	2.5 million	50–60 million	5.4 million kcal	20.5 million /172.5 million
E85 ethanol	28–3 million	100–120 million	18.6 million kcal	707 million /1.42 billion

Note. U.S. and global acreage estimates adapted from Andrade de Sá et al. (2012), Coalition Brewing (n.d.), Grand View Research (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d), HowStuffWorks (2025), International Organisation of Vine and Wine (2024), Lee-Weitz (2022), Tse (2024), USDA (2023), Wilson (2018), WineAmerica (2019), and Whisky Invest Direct (n.d.). Caloric yield and opportunity cost estimates based on Roberts (2021) and Trostle et al. (2011). Vodka acreage approximated using production volume and grain sourcing data.

These data illustrate how land allocated to alcohol and fuel production could, if repurposed, support global food access. Whiskey, wine, vodka, beer, and E85 ethanol collectively occupy tens of millions of U.S. acres—with E85 alone using 28–31 million acres domestically and up to 120 million acres globally. Despite relatively high caloric yields per acre, these crops serve nonessential, discretionary markets. When recalculated in terms of opportunity cost—how many people those calories could feed—the table reveals striking numbers: for example, ethanol's land use could support up to 707 million Americans or 1.42 billion people globally. This comparison highlights the trade-offs inherent in crop allocation decisions, especially when nutritional needs outweigh commercial preferences.

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Appendix B: Applied Perspective: Alcohol Versus Food Production

Land used to grow corn for ethanol, barley for beer, grapes for wine, and sugarcane for spirits could alternatively be used to produce food-grade crops with direct nutritional value. This substitution has implications for food security, feed availability, and price stability—particularly in regions experiencing ecological stress or caloric scarcity.

Table B: Land Use and Nutritional Opportunity Cost (per acre yields)

Crop use	Output for alcohol use	Potential food output
Corn for ethanol	500 gallons of ethanol	10,000 lbs of corn (food/feed)
Barley for beer	1,200 lbs of malt	2,000 lbs of food-grade barley
Grapes for wine	150 gallons of wine	8,000 lbs of table grapes or raisins
Sugarcane for spirits	600 gallons of alcohol/acre	30 tons of sugarcane (food/industrial)
Potatoes for vodka	200 gallons of vodka	45,000 lbs

Note. Yield and conversion estimates adapted from Renewable Fuels Association (2023), Sandhu & Guilbert (2008/2017), Tuck et al. (2025), and WineMaker Magazine (n.d.). Figures represent comparative outputs for alcohol production versus potential food-grade equivalents. Data reflect average estimates and may vary by region and production method.

The Potential food output column quantifies the forgone nutritional yield when land is allocated to either ethanol or alcohol production.:

- **corn for ethanol**: While ethanol yields 500 gallons per acre, the same land could produce 10,000 lbs. of corn suitable for human consumption or livestock feed. This represents a caloric opportunity cost exceeding 15 million kcal per acre (Trostle et al., 2011).
- **barley for beer**: Malted barley used in brewing could alternatively be processed into food-grade barley, which offers higher protein and fiber content per unit.
- **grapes for wine**: Prime viticultural land could yield table grapes or raisins, which are rich in micronutrients and serve broader dietary needs.
- **sugarcane for spirits**: The same acreage could produce sugarcane for food-grade sugar, molasses, or rotational crops that support soil health and food diversity (Swenson, 2013).

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Appendix C: Theoretical Foundation of Opportunity Cost

"Consumers have unlimited wants but limited resources, so satisfying one want means not satisfying another (the opportunity cost). An opportunity cost is 'the evaluation placed on the most highly valued of the rejected alternatives or opportunities.'" Spiller (2011, p. 595).

Whether deciding how to spend a Saturday afternoon or allocating billions to agricultural subsidies, every choice carries a hidden cost—the value of the next-best alternative that was not chosen. von Wieser (1914/1927) first codified the term opportunity cost in his 1914 work Theory of Social Economics, positioning opportunity cost not simply as financial loss but as foregone utility and productivity. It is defined as any real cost measured in terms of what is sacrificed—not only in monetary terms but in labor, time, and resource potential. von Wieser argued that actual cost is not what you pay, but what you sacrifice—whether in time, resources, or utility. His framing shifted economics away from purely monetary calculations and toward a broader understanding of value. It is often said, "time is money," and this is based on the concept of opportunity cost.

Modern scholars have expanded this view. The *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* defined opportunity cost as "the cost of doing something measured in terms of the best alternative forgone … not restricted to monetary cost but [including] any real cost in terms of things forgone—time, output, money, and utility" (Riera-Prunera, 2024, p. 4544). This broader lens is especially relevant in contexts like agriculture, where land, labor, and capital are finite, and choices have long-term consequences.

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The Digital Temptation: How Social Media Hijacks Our Purchasing Decisions and What Faith Teaches Us About Wise Consumption

Isabella Piña
Regent University
Roundtable: Business and Society

Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed consumer purchasing behavior, creating new psychological triggers that drive impulsive buying decisions. This article examines how social media utilizes sophisticated algorithms, social proof mechanisms, and emotional manipulation tactics to influence consumer decision-making. Drawing on consumer choice theory, neuroscience research, and biblical scholarship, this analysis synthesizes findings from over 20 peer-reviewed sources to examine the phenomenon of "digital impulse buying" and its underlying psychological factors, including social proof amplification, emotional hijacking, and cognitive load reduction. Furthermore, this analysis integrates a Christian worldview perspective on stewardship and ethical consumption, offering practical guidance for consumers seeking to make more intentional purchasing decisions. Case studies of faith-integrated businesses, including federal contracting firm Inspired Solutions, Inc., demonstrate how biblical principles can guide marketplace success. The article concludes with ethical, actionable strategies for consumers and businesses to navigate the digital marketplace and social media platforms responsibly.

Keywords: Christian stewardship, consumer choice theory, social media marketing, consumer behavior, impulse buying

The Scroll-to-Purchase Pipeline

Picture this: It is the middle of the day, and you are mindlessly scrolling through Facebook during your lunch break when a beautifully made post catches your eye. It is "Styles by Shar," an influencer you follow, who is showcasing a sleek new gadget that promises to revolutionize your morning routine and save you time. You are convinced that you need this gadget because it will improve your morning routine. Within three clicks, you have purchased the item, justifying the expense as an "investment in productivity." By evening, you wonder what possessed you to make that purchase.

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You are not alone. In our hyperconnected digital age, this scenario plays out millions of times daily across social media platforms worldwide. Recent research reveals that 71% of consumers are more likely to make purchases based on social media referrals, and a staggering 29% of social media users make purchases on the same day they encounter products online (Deloitte, 2024). Even more striking, research shows that consumers influenced by social media spend four times as much as those who are not exposed to these digital influences.

This phenomenon goes beyond clever marketing; it reveals a fundamental shift in how consumer choice theory operates in the digital era. Traditional models of rational decision-making, where consumers carefully consider different pricing options, rent products, weigh their choices, and make deliberate decisions, are being disrupted by sophisticated psychological manipulation techniques embedded in our daily digital experiences.

As we continue to research and examine this transformation, we must ask critical questions: How do social media platforms influence our purchasing decisions at a neurological and psychological level? What does this mean for our financial well-being and personal values? Moreover, how can we reclaim intentional decision-making in an age designed to short-circuit our rational thought processes?

The Psychology Behind the Purchase: Understanding Digital Consumer Behavior

The Shortened Customer Journey

The traditional customer journey, which includes awareness, consideration, evaluation, and purchase, once unfolded over days, weeks, or even months. Today's social media-driven purchasing decisions significantly compress this timeline. According to recent research, the customer journey has been significantly shortened by the immediacy of social media (Little et al., 2024). With social media, consumers can now discover a product, read reviews, compare options, and complete a purchase within minutes of their initial exposure.

This compression is not accidental, as meta-analysis confirms social media significantly influences purchasing decisions (Tung et al., 2023). Social media platforms utilize sophisticated algorithms designed to create what researchers refer to as "purchase urgency." Features like limited time offers, countdown timers, and social proof indicators ("23 people bought this in the last hour") trigger our fear of missing out (FOMO) and override our natural tendency to conduct thorough research and deliberate.

The Neuroscience of Social Influence

Modern consumer choice theory must account for how social media platforms exploit fundamental aspects of human psychology, with both active and passive

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social media use impacting well-being differently (Ding et al., 2017). Research has identified several key mechanisms.

Social Proof Amplification.

Humans are inherently social creatures who look to others for cues in decision-making. Social media platforms that utilize social media characteristics amplify this tendency by showcasing peer purchases, reviews, and recommendations in real-time streams. When we see friends or influencers endorsing products, our brains process these endorsements as personal recommendations from trusted sources, even when they are paid partnerships.

Emotional Hijacking.

Studies consistently show that emotions drive purchasing decisions more than rational analysis. Social media platforms excel at emotional manipulation through carefully curated content that triggers pleasure, excitement, envy, greed, or anxiety. Research indicates that positive emotional variables, such as pleasure, happiness, and pride, significantly influence purchasing behavior, aligning closely with hedonic values associated with impulse buying (Hashmi et al., 2019).

Cognitive Load Reduction.

Decision-making requires mental energy. Social media platforms employ various techniques to reduce cognitive load and conserve mental energy, including pre-filtered product options, leveraging celebrity connections, using social media influencers, incorporating user reviews, implementing timers, and simplifying "one-click" purchasing. This convenience masks the complexity of financial decisions, making spending feel effortless and necessary.

The Rise of Influencer Authority

Social media has significantly transformed consumer behavior, but no aspect has done so more dramatically than influencer marketing. Individuals who have achieved digital prominence have become modern-day trusted advisors, wielding significant influence over consumer purchasing decisions. Research shows that approximately 40% of consumers have made purchases directly inspired by influencer recommendations on social media (Singh et al., 2023).

The psychology behind influencer effectiveness is multifaceted:

- **Parasocial relationships:** Followers develop one-sided emotional connections with influencers, particularly among millennials (Gajewski, 2019), media figures, such as celebrities, fictional characters, or even pastors and YouTubers, whom they do not know personally.
- **Aspirational identity:** Influencers represent idealized versions of consumers' desired selves, with brand image significantly influencing purchase intention (Wang & Tsai, 2014).

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- **Authentic authority:** Successful influencers cultivate expertise in specific niches, making their recommendations feel expert-driven, aligning with how consumers assess advertising credibility (Ducoffe, 1995).
- **Peer validation:** Influencer content creates the illusion of peer recommendation rather than traditional advertising.

The Dark Side of Digital Consumption: Impulse Buying in the Social Media Age

Understanding Impulse Buying Behavior

Impulse buying occurs when consumers experience unexpected, intense, and persistent urges to make immediate purchases without prior planning or consideration of long-term consequences, often reflecting self-control failure (Baumeister, 2002; Rook, 1987). Although impulse buying has existed throughout human history, social media has systematically amplified both its frequency and intensity.

Recent research reveals alarming trends in digital impulse buying:

- **Frequency increase:** Social media users are significantly more likely to engage in impulse buying than non-users (Al-Zyoud, 2018).
- **Spending amplification:** Consumers who have a social media presence and are influenced by social media and celebrity influencers spend four times more on impulse purchases than those who do not have a social media account.
- **Demographic vulnerability:** Millennials and Generation Z are particularly susceptible to social media-driven impulse buying (Nyrhinen et al., 2023).
- **Emotional triggers:** Boredom, stress, and social comparison are primary emotional states that lead to impulsive social media purchases.

The Algorithmic Manipulation Engine

Social media platforms employ sophisticated algorithms designed to maximize engagement and, ultimately, purchasing behavior. These systems analyze vast amounts of user data to predict and influence buying decisions:

- **Behavioral tracking:** Platforms monitor geographic locations, content viewed, clicks, time spent viewing content, previous purchases, and even mouse movements to build detailed psychological profiles.
- **Predictive targeting:** Machine learning algorithms predict when users are most likely to make purchases and deliver targeted content at optimal moments, significantly affecting consumer buying behavior (Ugonna et al., 2017).
- **Social pressure creation:** Algorithms strategically show users what their friends and peers are buying, creating artificial social pressure to conform.

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- **Scarcity manufacturing:** Artificial scarcity messages ("Only 3 left in stock!") create urgency even when inventory levels are adequate.

The Financial and Psychological Toll

The consequences of social media-driven impulse buying extend far beyond individual purchases.

Financial Strain.

Repeated impulse purchases strain individual and household budgets. Overspending on unnecessary items can lead to credit card debt or reduced savings. Purchases made are usually not for essential items but are often influenced by current trends. Small, frequent buys (e.g., influencer-promoted deals) can add up quickly and contribute to credit card debt, particularly among younger demographics facing economic pressure.

Environmental Impact.

Increased consumption rates contribute to environmental degradation by fueling overproduction and generating excess waste, as unused or low-quality items accumulate in homes and eventually end up in landfills. This problem is compounded by social media trends that drive impulse purchases of fast fashion, gadgets, and other trend-driven products that quickly become irrelevant, leaving consumers with items they no longer want or need.

Emotional and Psychological Impact.

Studies have linked specific types of social media use to depressed mood (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Buyer's remorse follows purchases that were not truly desired or advantageous. Decision fatigue from constant exposure to purchasing opportunities depletes mental resources. Research confirms that social network use significantly impacts psychological well-being (Arampatzi et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2019), which is needed for important financial decisions. Comparison traps from seeing influencers or peers showcase luxury or abundance can create dissatisfaction with one's own life. Addictive behavior develops as the dopamine hit from buying can lead to repeated emotional spending. Identity confusion occurs as social media-driven consumption can disconnect individuals from their authentic values and priorities.

The Christian Response: Stewardship, Wisdom, and Intentional Living

Biblical Foundations for Wise Consumption

While secular research provides valuable insights into the influence of social media on consumer behavior, a Christian worldview offers additional frameworks for understanding and responding to these challenges. Scripture provides clear

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guidance on stewardship, contentment, and wise decision-making that directly applies to digital consumption.

Stewardship Principles.

The Bible teaches that all resources ultimately belong to God, and humans are called to be faithful stewards of the resources entrusted to them (Cafferky, 2015). This perspective fundamentally reframes purchasing decisions from "what can I afford?" to "how does this purchase align with my role as a steward of God's resources?" The concept of stewardship encompasses several key principles relevant to consumer behavior: intentionality, where every financial decision should be made with purpose and consideration; accountability, where stewards must be prepared to give an account for the resources God has given them to manage; generosity, where God has given resources to everyone, not just to be used only for personal needs, but also for serving others; and sustainability, where stewardship considers long-term consequences, not just immediate gratification.

Contentment Over Consumption.

Paul's letter to the Philippians presents a powerful counter-narrative to consumer culture, offering the insight, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (New International Version [NIV], 1978, Philippians 4:11). This contentment is not passive resignation, but rather an active satisfaction with God's provision. Research supports the wisdom of this biblical principle. Studies show that people who practice gratitude and contentment report higher levels of life satisfaction and make more thoughtful financial decisions. Contentment acts as a natural buffer against the emotional triggers that social media platforms exploit.

Discernment and Wisdom.

Proverbs repeatedly emphasize the importance of wisdom in decision-making. "The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps" (NIV, 1978, Proverbs 14:15). This principle directly challenges the impulse-driven nature of social media consumption, calling believers to pause, reflect, pray, and evaluate before acting.

Faith-Driven Consumer Behavior

Research indicates that faith-driven consumers comprise a substantial and expanding market segment. According to American Insights (2024), faith-driven consumers comprise 41 million U.S. adults with $2 trillion in annual buying power. These consumers demonstrate distinct characteristics: (a) values-based decision making, where 79% believe their buying decisions are an important way of living out their faith; (b) different market needs, where 73% report having different consumer needs than the general market; (c) authenticity seekers, who actively seek out brands that align with their values and demonstrate a genuine commitment to ethical practices and environmental sustainability; and (d) a stewardship mindset,

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where they view spending decisions through the lens of faithful resource management.

This demographic represents consumers who have intentionally chosen to resist the impulse-driven nature of social media marketing in favor of more thoughtful, values-aligned purchasing decisions.

Practical Applications of Christian Consumer Ethics

The Stewardship Filter

Before making any purchase, especially those triggered by social media, faith-driven consumers can apply a stewardship filter: prayer and reflection, taking time to pray and reflect before significant purchases; biblical alignment, considering whether the purchase aligns with biblical values and priorities; opportunity cost, evaluating what other kingdom purposes the money could serve; and long-term impact, considering the purchase's long-term effects on finances, relationships, and spiritual growth.

Community Accountability

Many Christian traditions emphasize community decision-making and mutual accountability. Applying this principle to consumer behavior might involve discussing significant purchases with trusted friends or mentors, joining or forming accountability groups focused on financial stewardship, and seeking counsel from mature believers when facing major financial decisions.

Countercultural Contentment

In a culture that equates happiness with consumption, Christians are called to model a different way of living. This might involve practicing gratitude for current possessions rather than constantly seeking new ones, finding identity in a relationship with God rather than material possessions, and using social media mindfully, recognizing its influence, and actively resisting manipulation.

The Intersection of Technology and Temptation: A Modern Spiritual Battle

Recognizing Digital Temptation

Social media platforms do not merely present purchasing opportunities; they create sophisticated temptation systems designed to override rational decision-making. From a Christian perspective, this represents a modern form of spiritual warfare where technology amplifies age-old human weaknesses like envy, pride, and discontentment.

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The Envy Engine.

Social media feeds create constant opportunities for comparison and envy (Tandoc et al., 2015). Users see curated highlights of others' lives and possessions, triggering desires for things they previously did not know they wanted. This aligns with the tenth commandment's warning against coveting what belongs to others.

Pride and Status Signaling.

Many social media purchases are driven by desires to signal status, success, or belonging. This reflects the deeper spiritual issue: finding identity in possessions rather than in one's relationship with God.

The Deception of Need.

Sophisticated marketing creates artificial needs and convinces consumers that their wants are now necessities they cannot live without. This echoes the serpent's deception in the Garden of Eden, where genuine needs were twisted into destructive desires. From a biblical perspective, impulse buying driven by social media often reflects a deeper heart issue. Individuals are trying to fill a spiritual void by purchasing material things—a void that can only be filled by God.

Spiritual Disciplines for Digital Consumers

Traditional spiritual disciplines offer powerful tools for resisting digital manipulation:

Sabbath from Social Media.

Regular breaks from social media platforms allow the mind to reset and reduce exposure to purchasing triggers. Many Christians find that observing a digital Sabbath helps clarify their actual needs versus artificially created wants.

Meditation and Mindfulness.

Taking time for quiet reflection before purchases can help distinguish between Spirit-led decisions and emotion-driven impulses. Christian meditation on Scripture provides a foundation for wise decision-making.

Fasting from Consumption.

Periodic fasting from non-essential purchases can break the cycle of impulse buying and increase awareness of how much external pressures influence our decisions.

Gratitude Practice.

Regularly counting blessings and expressing gratitude for one's current possessions help counter the discontent that social media often cultivates.

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Practical Strategies for Wise Digital Consumption For Individual Consumers

Create Intentional Barriers.

Research indicates that adding friction to the purchasing process can significantly reduce impulse buying. Practical steps include allocating time spent on social media (for example, 30 minutes a day, as the less time spent is the less opportunity to make unnecessary purchases), removing saved payment information from social media apps, placing items in carts and implementing a 24–48 hour waiting period for non-essential purchases, unfollowing accounts that consistently trigger purchase desires, and using browser extensions that block retail websites during certain hours.

Develop a Values-Based Budget.

Create a budget that prioritizes kingdom values and life goals over impulse purchases. Before assigning dollars, clarify what matters most in light of God's Word. Set aside money for giving and generosity first. Set aside funds for experiences and relationships rather than material goods. Include categories for helping others and supporting causes you care about. Regularly review purchases against your stated values and priorities. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (NIV, 1978, Matthew 6:21).

Create Guardrails Against Impulse Buying.

Apply the 72-Hour Rule: wait three days before buying non-essential items. Budget "fun money" by giving yourself a monthly allowance—when it is gone, it is gone. Unfollow temptation by muting social media accounts that promote consumerism. Pray before purchase by asking the Holy Spirit for guidance. "The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance" (English Standard Version, 2001, Proverbs 21:5).

Practice Mindful Social Media Consumption.

Set specific times for social media use rather than mindless scrolling. Regularly audit your feeds to remove accounts that promote unhealthy consumption patterns. Follow accounts that align with your values and promote contentment. Use social media primarily for connection and learning rather than shopping.

Build Community Accountability.

Share financial goals with trusted friends or family members. Join or create groups focused on intentional living and wise stewardship. Find an accountability partner for major financial decisions. Participate in faith communities that emphasize stewardship and contentment.

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For Business Leaders and Marketers

Ethical Marketing Practices.

Christian business leaders have opportunities to model ethical marketing that respects consumer agency. This includes providing complete, honest product information rather than manipulative emotional appeals; avoiding creating artificial scarcity or pressure tactics; designing purchasing processes that encourage thoughtful decision-making; and implementing clear return policies that reduce pressure to make quick decisions.

Stakeholder Capitalism.

Consider the full impact of marketing practices on customer well-being. Measure success not just by sales volume but by customer satisfaction and financial health. Avoid targeting vulnerable populations with predatory marketing. Create products and services that provide genuine value rather than feeding artificial desires. Implement marketing strategies that build trust rather than exploit psychological vulnerabilities.

Technology for Good.

Use technology platforms to promote wise consumption. Develop tools that enable customers to make informed purchasing decisions. Provide education about product lifecycle costs and actual value. Implement features that encourage customers to consider alternatives before making a purchase. Design user experiences that promote mindful consumption rather than impulse buying.

Case Studies in Conscious Consumption

Faith-Integrated Excellence: Inspired Solutions, Inc.

Perhaps no example better demonstrates the integration of faith principles with business excellence than Inspired Solutions, Inc. This federal contracting firm has achieved remarkable success while maintaining an unwavering commitment to Christian values. Founded in 2015 by Isabella Piña, a retired U.S. Army veteran, the company exemplifies how biblical stewardship principles can guide business decisions in highly competitive markets.

Stewardship in Federal Contracting.

With over $50 million in federal contracts, Inspired Solutions has maintained a 100% on-time delivery rate while serving critical government agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and USAID. This track record reflects more than operational excellence—it demonstrates the biblical principle that faithful stewardship in small things leads to greater responsibilities (NIV, 1978, Luke 16:10).

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The company's approach to federal contracting illustrates several key stewardship principles:

- **Integrity without compromise:** Despite pressures to cut corners in competitive bidding situations, Inspired Solutions maintains rigorous quality standards, viewing each contract as a trust to be stewarded faithfully.
- **Excellence as worship:** The company's ISO 9001 certification and multiple socio-economic certifications (8(a), SDVOSB, M/WBE, EDWOSB) reflect a commitment to excellence that stems from doing all work "as unto the Lord" (NIV, 1978, Colossians 3:23).
- **Servant leadership:** Decisions by leadership prioritize long-term relationships and ethical practices over short-term profits, reflecting Jesus' teaching about servant leadership.

Resource Stewardship for Kingdom Purposes.

Inspired Solutions demonstrates how business success can serve broader kingdom purposes. The company's profits directly support Rick & Isabella Piña Ministries, which conducts mission work in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Dominica. This integration demonstrates how business resources can be effectively stewarded not only for operational needs but also for advancing God's kingdom globally. Recent mission initiatives funded through business operations include educational programs for underserved communities in the Caribbean; infrastructure development projects that provide clean water and reliable electricity; job training programs that equip local populations with marketable skills; and spiritual development initiatives that combine practical assistance with gospel outreach.

Ethical Decision-Making Under Pressure.

The federal contracting environment often presents ethical challenges, from competitive bidding pressures to complex regulatory requirements. Inspired Solutions' approach demonstrates how biblical principles can guide decision-making even in morally ambiguous situations. For example, when faced with opportunities to submit technically compliant but ethically questionable proposals, the company consistently chooses transparency and honesty, even when this approach might result in lost business. This commitment has enhanced their reputation and strengthened long-term client relationships.

Inspired Solutions has been certified as a Great Place to Work for two consecutive years, with 100% of employees saying it is a great place to work compared to 57% at typical U.S. companies. This recognition reflects the company's commitment to treating employees as image-bearers of God, worthy of dignity, respect, and opportunities for growth and development.

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Corporate Examples: Patagonia's Anti-Consumption Campaign

Outdoor clothing company Patagonia famously ran a "Do Not Buy This Jacket" campaign, encouraging customers to consider whether they truly needed new gear (Patagonia, 2011). This counterintuitive approach built tremendous brand loyalty and demonstrated how ethical marketing can enhance business success. Patagonia's approach includes repair and reuse programs that encourage customers to repair existing gear rather than replace it, quality manufacturing that creates products designed to last for decades rather than seasons, environmental education that teaches customers about the actual costs of consumption, and values alignment that consistently demonstrates commitment to environmental stewardship.

Faith-Based Business Model: Hobby Lobby's Approach

Hobby Lobby, a major retail chain founded on Christian principles, demonstrates how businesses can integrate faith values into their operations: (a) Sunday closure, closing stores on Sundays to prioritize employee well-being and family time (Hobby Lobby Newsroom, 2022); (b) living wage policy, paying employees above minimum wage as an expression of human dignity; (c) ethical sourcing, implementing supply chain practices that consider worker welfare; and (d) community investment, using profits to support educational and religious institutions (Hobby Lobby Newsroom, 2017).

Success Story: The Minimalist Movement

The minimalist movement represents a countercultural response to social media-driven consumption. Leaders like Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus have built large followings by promoting intentional living and conscious consumption (Millburn & Nicodemus, 2011, 2021). Their approach demonstrates how social media can be used to promote contentment rather than consumption. Key principles from the minimalist movement include:

- **Intentional acquisition:** Every purchase should serve a specific purpose and align with life values. Wilson and Bellezza (2022) identified this as "mindfully curated consumption," where consumers practice intentional, thoughtful purchasing that emphasizes being aware of what one owns and avoiding accidental purchases of duplicates or unneeded items (pp. 801–802).
- **Quality over quantity:** Investing in fewer, higher-quality items rather than constant replacement purchases. Pangarkar et al. (2021) found that minimalistic consumption highlights subjective well-being, happiness, and increased quality of life through reducing consumption to meet only essential needs based on necessity, benefit, or situation.
- **Experience prioritization:** Spending money on experiences and relationships rather than material possessions. Van Boven and Gilovich

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(2003) demonstrated that experiential purchases make people happier than material purchases once basic needs are covered.
- Digital detox: Regular breaks from social media to maintain perspective on actual needs versus manufactured wants. Radtke et al. (2022) defined digital detox as "a voluntary and intentional limited removal of digital devices and/or specific subsets of smartphone use to promote health behavior change" (p. 195).

The Future of Faithful Consumption in a Digital World

Emerging Trends and Challenges

As technology continues to evolve, new challenges and opportunities will emerge for conscious consumers.

Artificial Intelligence and Personalization.

AI systems will become increasingly sophisticated at predicting and influencing consumer behavior, with product attributes and brand image increasingly shaping purchase intention (Naseri et al., 2025). This requires greater vigilance and more intentional resistance to algorithmic manipulation.

Virtual and Augmented Reality Shopping.

Immersive shopping experiences will further blur the line between online and offline consumption, necessitating new strategies for maintaining purchasing discipline.

Cryptocurrency and Digital Payments.

New payment methods may make spending feel less tangible, requiring updated approaches to financial awareness and budgeting.

Social Commerce Integration.

The integration of shopping directly into social media platforms will continue to accelerate, with e-WOM engagement significantly influencing purchase intention (Yusuf et al., 2020), making it even more important to develop intentional consumption habits.

Building Resilient Communities

The future of faithful consumption will likely depend on building strong communities that support wise decision-making. Inspired Solutions' integration with Rick & Isabella Piña Ministries provides a compelling model for how businesses can help build such communities.

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Faith-Based Financial Education.

Churches and religious organizations have opportunities to provide education about digital consumption and stewardship principles. Inspired Solutions' leadership regularly speaks at conferences and churches about integrating faith with business excellence, demonstrating how professional success can serve kingdom purposes.

International Community Development.

Through their mission work in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Dominica, the company demonstrates how business resources can build resilient communities globally. Projects include (a) infrastructure development using business expertise and resources to provide clean water, reliable electricity, and communication systems; (b) economic development creating job training programs that equip local populations with marketable skills in technology and logistics; (c) educational initiatives supporting schools and educational programs that combine practical skills with character development; and (d) sustainable solutions implementing projects that create long-term economic opportunities rather than just temporary assistance.

Federal Contracting as Community Service.

The company's approach to government contracting demonstrates how serving federal agencies can be viewed as serving communities: (a) Veterans Affairs projects providing IT infrastructure and audiovisual systems that directly improve healthcare delivery for veterans; (b) defense infrastructure supporting military installations with critical technology and power systems that enhance national security; (c) intelligence community support providing secure, reliable IT infrastructure for agencies that protect national interests; and (d) international development supporting USAID programs that promote security and prosperity in developing regions.

Alternative Business Networks.

Faith-based business networks provide community connection without the consumption pressure of traditional networking: (a) values-based partnerships developing supplier and client relationships based on shared values rather than just economics; (b) mentorship programs connecting younger professionals with experienced leaders who can guide integrating faith with business success; (c) cooperative ventures partnering with other faith-based businesses to pursue larger opportunities that none could achieve alone; and (d) knowledge sharing using business expertise to serve non-profit organizations and ministries.

Technology as Tool, Not Master

The goal is not to eliminate technology or social media, but to use these tools intentionally rather than letting them use us. This requires digital literacy, understanding how algorithms work and how platforms influence behavior; intentional design, choosing apps and platforms that align with personal values and

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goals; regular evaluation, periodically assessing whether technology use supports or undermines life priorities; and community integration, using technology to build genuine relationships and community rather than replacing human connection.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Agency in the Digital Marketplace

The transformation of consumer behavior through social media represents one of the most significant shifts in human decision-making in modern history. The ability of digital platforms to influence purchasing decisions at a subconscious level challenges fundamental assumptions about human agency and rational choice.

However, awareness of these influences provides the first step toward reclaiming intentional decision-making. By understanding the psychological mechanisms behind social media manipulation, consumers can develop strategies to resist unwanted influences and make purchasing decisions that align with their authentic values and long-term well-being.

For people of faith, this challenge represents both a spiritual battle and an opportunity for witness. By modeling contentment, stewardship, and intentional living in a culture obsessed with consumption, Christians can offer a compelling alternative narrative about what constitutes a good life.

The path forward requires both individual discipline and community support. No one can resist the sophisticated manipulation of modern marketing alone. We need communities committed to mutual accountability, businesses willing to prioritize customer well-being over short-term profits, and faith traditions that provide practical guidance for living faithfully in a digital age. The apostle Paul's words to the Romans provide relevant guidance for our current situation: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (NIV, 1978, Romans 12:2). In a world designed to capture our attention and influence our purchasing decisions, this transformation requires intentional effort, community support, and reliance on wisdom that transcends cultural trends.

As we navigate the complexities of digital consumption, we can demonstrate that a life rooted in something more profound than material acquisition is not only possible but profoundly satisfying. Companies like Inspired Solutions prove that businesses can achieve remarkable success while maintaining an unwavering commitment to biblical values. Their $50+ million in federal contracts, 100% on-time delivery rate, and Great Place to Work certification demonstrate that faith-integrated excellence is not only possible but also provides competitive advantages in the marketplace.

The challenge is not to retreat from technology but to engage with it as faithful stewards, using these powerful tools to build authentic community, support genuine needs, and point toward the lasting joy that comes from living in alignment with our deepest values. Whether managing a federal contracting firm, serving in

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international missions, or simply making daily purchasing decisions, we can choose to be intentional participants in a global economy rather than passive consumers manipulated by sophisticated algorithms.

The choice is ours: we can allow ourselves to be passive consumers manipulated by sophisticated algorithms or we can become intentional participants in a global economy, making purchasing decisions that reflect our values, support our communities, and contribute to human flourishing. The example of faith-integrated businesses, such as Inspired Solutions and Hobby Lobby, combined with their ministry work across the Caribbean and other nations, demonstrates it is possible to achieve professional success while serving kingdom purposes. The future of faithful consumption depends on the choices we make today—choices that can simultaneously advance business objectives, serve community needs, and glorify God through excellent stewardship of the resources entrusted to us. The choice is ours!

About the Author

Isabella Piña is CEO and founder of Inspired Solutions, Inc., a federal contracting firm that has managed over $50 million in government contracts while maintaining a 100% on-time delivery rate. The company holds multiple certifications, including 8(a), SDVOSB, M/WBE, and EDWOSB, and has been recognized as a Great Place to Work for two consecutive years. A retired U.S. Army veteran with 21 years of service, Isabella holds a Master's in Healthcare Management and is pursuing a Doctorate in Business Administration in Strategic Leadership at Regent University. Isabella also co-founded Rick & Isabella Piña Ministries, which conducts mission work in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Africa, Dominica, and many other Caribbean islands, demonstrating her commitment to integrating business success with kingdom purposes.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Isabella Piña, Inspired Solutions, Inc., 10432 Balls Ford Road, Suite 332, Manassas, VA 20109. Email: ipina@inspired-us.com

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When Nonprofits Flounder: Practical Strategies for Cultivating Board Engagement and Courageous Followership

Jennifer Brogee and Tamara Leonard
Indiana Wesleyan University
Roundtable: Followership

Abstract

Grassroots nonprofits play a critical role in addressing community needs, often emerging from the passion and commitment of a founder who identified gaps in local services. As these organizations mature and the founder's involvement declines, a sustainable leadership model with engaged staff and board members becomes essential to continue their mission. Despite increased attention on nonprofit sustainability, the practical integration of followership theory into board engagement remains underexplored. Drawing from our dual perspectives as nonprofit scholars and practitioners, this synthesis demonstrates that nonprofit organizations can take practical steps to encourage courageous followership behaviors among leaders, board members, and staff. By fostering an environment that celebrates the courage to assume responsibility, serve, challenge, participate in transformation, and take moral action (Chaleff, 2009), nonprofits benefit from increased mission focus and long-term sustainability. Through both academic inquiry and applied professional experience, this study bridges theory and practice to produce fifteen practical recommendations in board member selection, board training, board structure, and director and board president behaviors. These actionable strategies provide evidence-based guidance for leaders and boards seeking to cultivate courageous followership practices that advance organizational purpose and community impact.

Keywords: courageous followership, nonprofit governance, board engagement, founder's syndrome, organizational sustainability

Grassroots nonprofits play a critical role in addressing community needs and often emerge from the passion and commitment of a founder who identified gaps in local services (Toepler, 2003). However, many nonprofits reach a critical juncture when their founders reduce involvement or depart entirely. Without engaged board members and staff ready to assume leadership responsibilities, these organizations face operational disruption, mission drift, or closure (Froelich et al., 2011).

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Signs of organizational distress, or "floundering," appear when boards endorse founder's decisions instead of providing strategic oversight, staff wait for direction rather than taking initiative, stakeholder engagement declines, and strategic plans stall in implementation. These symptoms often stem from founder's syndrome, a condition in which a founder retains excessive control over strategy and decisions, inhibiting board development, staff growth, and organizational adaptability (James, 2019). Without planning and shared responsibility, even the most enthusiastic founding vision loses momentum. Sustainable leadership protects the mission and ensures continuity once the founder steps back.

Despite increased attention on nonprofit sustainability, practical applications of followership theory to board engagement remain underexplored. Followership theory offers a valuable framework by shifting focus from leadership alone to active follower participation in organizational success (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). To address this gap, two nonprofit founders synthesized Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model, current nonprofit leadership research, and applied professional experience to confront the root causes of founder's syndrome. By examining research documenting improved followership behaviors, specific, actionable strategies emerged that boards and executive directors can implement to sustain their mission and meet community needs.

Nonprofit Founder Stories

The Legacy Arts and the One Love Global Wellness Foundation (2025) are presented as examples that demonstrate how nonprofit founders recognize and respond to unmet needs within their communities (Toepler, 2003). Analyzing the distinct impacts and challenges these organizations face underscores the vital role of engaged followers. Followership theory can contribute to addressing sustainability challenges, strengthening organizational capacity, and enhancing organizational success (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Legacy Arts

Five entrepreneurs who own businesses in downtown Lima, Ohio, founded Legacy Arts to promote regional music, creative arts, and entrepreneurship. The nonprofit supports entrepreneurs and creative arts professionals and highlights the region's creative economy through an annual festival, scholarships, and music events. As founding members have stepped back, a lack of shared ownership and initiative among newer board members has limited momentum. Encouraging followers to assume responsibility and participate in transformation could reenergize engagement, ensuring the organization continues to fulfill its mission.

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One Love Global Wellness Foundation

The One Love Global Wellness Foundation (2025) was established in response to the 2011 housing and economic crisis. The foundation has served over 20,000 individuals through food distribution and Blessing Bags. The organization's holistic approach connects participants with essential resources, including housing, employment, mental health support, substance abuse assistance, and healthcare referrals. The organization's leadership structure reflects its grassroots origins, with board members primarily composed of family members. As the founder reduces her involvement, the foundation's continued success will require board members and staff to embody courageous followership so that the One Love Global Wellness Foundation can continue to meet the community's needs.

Problem Statement

In 2025, the United States had approximately 1.9 million registered nonprofit organizations (Internal Revenue Service, 2025). These organizations represent a rapidly expanding sector of the economy that spans healthcare, education, the arts, and social services, forming a vital part of the nation's community-support infrastructure. Nonprofits play a vital role in confronting society's most urgent challenges, from delivering essential services to driving long-term systems change (Smith Arrillaga et al., 2025).

Larger nonprofits typically have greater resources, paid staff, and broader service capacities. In contrast, grassroots nonprofits operate through community-centered initiatives, rely heavily on volunteers, and adapt quickly to local conditions (Toepler, 2003). While this adaptability fosters strong community connections, grassroots organizations frequently face obstacles related to long-term sustainability and founder transitions (Froelich et al., 2011). As nonprofits mature and founders reduce their ongoing investment, developing a sustainable leadership model with engaged staff and board members becomes critical to sustaining the organization's mission and impact.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to identify research-based strategies for fostering courageous followership in nonprofit organizations. The process unfolded in two distinct phases: an initial search and a framework-guided analysis. During the first phase, the researchers conducted targeted searches across academic databases to locate peer-reviewed studies examining followership in nonprofit contexts. The search strategy incorporated multiple keyword combinations to capture research involving nonprofit founders, leadership, and followership, with all sources published in English through January 2025, primarily within the past five years. During the

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second phase, the researchers employed Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model as the analytical framework. They systematically examined the selected literature to identify behaviors that represent each dimension of courageous followership, as well as organizational factors, structures, or practices that foster those behaviors, thereby informing practical recommendations for nonprofit boards and leaders.

Founder's Syndrome

Grassroots nonprofits may lack a foundation that supports longevity due to founder's syndrome. Founder's syndrome refers to a set of challenges that arise when a nonprofit's operations and identity center heavily on its founder, who struggles to adapt to necessary organizational changes, often because of emotional attachment, a desire for control, and a reluctance to share power (James, 2019). Founder's syndrome typically results in handpicking loyal board members, making most decisions alone, and resisting innovation or new strategies (Boustani & Boustani, 2017). Furthermore, organizations experiencing founder's syndrome face difficulties adapting to new community needs, reluctance among other leaders or board members to speak up, and challenges in building sustainable leadership models (Geib & Boenigk, 2022).

Founder's syndrome differs from standard leadership transitions because the founder's personal energy, networks, vision, and emotional investment are deeply embedded in the organization's structure, culture, and identity (Boustani & Boustani, 2017). Succession became more difficult because the organization's success had historically relied heavily on the founder's unique contributions (James, 2019). Ultimately, overcoming founder's syndrome requires a deliberate shift from personality-driven control to shared governance and accountability. Counteracting these issues requires strengthening the organization's leadership system.

Nonprofit Leadership

A systems-oriented approach to leadership provides a sustainable framework for grassroots nonprofits. By emphasizing shared influence, collaborative governance, accountability, and mutual responsibility among all organizational members, leaders could strengthen both leadership and followership development. This approach supports smoother leadership transitions, sustained mission alignment, and improved adaptability in changing environments (Geib & Boenigk, 2022; Linville & Rennaker, 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Organizational Leadership

Organizational leadership is the process of influence that includes leaders, followers, and the organizational context, extending far beyond the actions of any single leader (Kellerman, 2008). Leadership and followership roles interchange in response to

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organizational needs, allowing individuals to lead and follow as circumstances evolve (Eva et al., 2021). Engaged followers contribute constructively to organizational direction through feedback, active participation, and co-construction of goals and strategies, making them essential to innovation and success (Linville & Rennaker, 2022; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Leaders of nonprofits are followers too, since they must follow the strategic leadership of the board of directors, and they benefit from embracing their dual roles (Donaldson, 2025).

Followership

Followership examines how followers impact the leadership process through their actions, influence, and shared purpose with leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers influence leader emergence, shape organizational direction, and move fluidly between leading and following roles while aligning around shared purpose (Chaleff, 2009; Eva et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021). Engaged followers intentionally co-construct leadership processes to advance common purposes and strengthen organizational outcomes (Linville & Rennaker, 2022). Effective followers actively partner with leaders, support organizational goals, and have the courage to either challenge or support leaders as circumstances require (Chaleff, 2009; Riggio, 2020).

Nonprofit Governance

A board serves as the highest governing authority in nonprofit organizations, with primary responsibilities including setting strategic direction, ensuring financial stability, upholding the organization's mission and values, and selecting and replacing the leader (Donaldson, 2025). Nonprofits operate under high public expectations and firm mission commitments, making governance essential for sound resource stewardship, transparent accountability, and the effective advancement of community causes (Blevins et al., 2020; Bowen, 2012). Strong leadership and accountability sustain public trust, guide strategy, and influence both organizational outcomes and long-term success (Bowen, 2012). Boards function most effectively when engaging in fiduciary, strategic, and generative modes of governance that anchor values, decision making, and mission continuity (Chait et al., 2005).

Courageous Followership Framework

Chaleff (2009) developed a model of courageous followership that defines the intentional, initiative-driven partnership between leaders and followers, in which followers share responsibility for organizational success. Courageous followers remain accountable for their actions while willingly granting leaders authority, yet they never surrender their autonomy or values. Chaleff's framework identified five dimensions of courageous followership: the courage to assume responsibility, the courage to serve, the

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courage to challenge, the courage to participate in transformation, and the courage to take moral action. The following sections examine research-based strategies that foster these behaviors within nonprofit boards. Figure 1 summarizes the research-based strategies.

Figure 1: Summary of Research Synthesis Linked to Courageous Followership Behaviors

Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
Courage to assume responsibility	Nonprofits benefit from having board members with strong individual, relational, and collective identity (Megheirkouni et al., 2025)	**Board Member Selection**
	Members with a reputation as an effective leader also tend to be viewed as an effective follower; followership supports more functional team interactions (Baird & Benson, 2022)	**Board Member Selection**
Courage to serve	Leaders' emotion-related behaviors congruent with display norms generate engagement and loyalty (Silard, 2018, p. 304)	**Director & Board Chair Behaviors**
	Affective commitment increases among board members with a longer tenure on the board (Stephens et al., 2004, p. 497)	**Board Structure**
	Affective commitment increases among board members who have accepted board leadership or officer positions (Stephens et al., 2004, p. 497)	**Board Structure**
	A positive relationship between increased gender diversity and increased effective board governance practices (Buse et al., 2016)	**Board Member Selection**

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Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
	Policies and inclusion practices that support diversity improve performance when diversity exists (Buse et al., 2016)	**Board Structure**
	Board-led nomination committees support board functioning (Minichilli et al., 2009)	**Board Member Selection**
Courage to challenge	Critical debate among board members positively impacts board task performance (Minichilli et al., 2009).	**Board Training**
	Board commitment activities, such as preparing for meetings and asking critical questions, increase member commitment (Minichilli et al., 2009, p. 68).	**Board Training**
	Regular executive sessions in board meetings encourage open & transparent communication (Bowen, 2012).	**Board Structure**
Courage to participate in transformation	Board members & directors need clarity around and training in all three modalities encompassed in leadership, including governance (Donaldson, 2025)	**Board Training**
	A lack of internal infrastructure or transition planning increases vulnerability to disruption; shared leadership significantly relates to nonprofit leadership continuity (Geib & Boenigk, 2022; James, 2019).	**Board Structure**

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Courageous Followership Behavior	Research	Practical Recommendation Theme
Courage to take moral action	A founder who retains tight control diminishes the board's ability to lead independently (James, 2019)	**Director & Board Chair Behaviors**
	Both the nonprofit executive director and board president must set an example to followers to behave as stewards (Brinckerhoff, 2004)	**Director & Board Chair Behaviors**
	Workshops & scenario-based exercises that engage in role-playing improve ethical decision-making (Gentile, 2010)	**Board Training**

Practical Recommendation Themes:

- **Board Member Selection**
- **Board Structure**
- **Board Training**
- **Director & Pres. Behaviors**

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Assume Responsibility

Courageous followers assume responsibility for themselves and their organizations through personal accountability, self-assessment, feedback seeking, and professional growth (Chaleff, 2009). Nonprofits strengthen when board members demonstrate a robust follower identity at the individual, relational, and collective levels (Megheirkouni et al., 2025). Individual identity reflects confidence in one's value; relational identity emphasizes commitment and high-quality relationships; and collective identity prioritizes group membership. When followers embody all three aspects of identity, trust between leaders and board members increases, producing more effective governance and stronger organizational outcomes.

Individuals recognized as effective leaders also demonstrate effective followership (Baird & Benson, 2022). The presence of effective followership enhances team effectiveness by promoting collaboration, reducing conflict, and supporting shared leadership. In nonprofit and organizational settings, these qualities create more

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productive, cohesive, and resilient teams. When board members take ownership of their roles and lead with courage, they build the trust and collaboration needed to keep the mission strong and the organization moving forward.

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Serve

Courageous followers willingly engage in the challenging work of serving both leaders and the organization (Chaleff, 2009). Followers with the courage to serve dedicate themselves to the leader's and organization's mission through active, competent, and loyal participation. They evaluate ideas, present solution options, and provide mission-focused feedback (Chaleff, 2009).

Board culture significantly influences members' willingness to serve. A sense of belonging and affective commitment grows among board members with longer tenure and leadership experience, strengthening organizational attachment and stability (Stephens et al., 2004). Nonprofit leaders whose emotion-related behaviors align with display norms foster greater follower engagement and loyalty (Silard, 2018). Research has also demonstrated that gender diversity on boards correlates with more effective governance practices (Buse et al., 2016). Board-led nomination processes that select and retain individuals best suited to the organization's needs contribute to overall board effectiveness (Minichilli et al., 2009).

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Challenge

Courageous followers speak up when behaviors or policies conflict with their sense of what is right (Chaleff, 2009). They challenge questionable actions, seek clarity and accountability, and address unethical conduct directly to safeguard institutional integrity. Courageous followers speak truth to power by respectfully challenging leaders or organizational norms that conflict with ethical standards or mission priorities, offering honest feedback, and questioning decisions when necessary.

Minichilli et al. (2009) emphasized that constructive boardroom debate encourages members to challenge assumptions, explore alternative solutions, and leverage the group's diverse expertise. Boards that foster open discussion and critical debate among members demonstrate stronger task performance. Boardroom cultures that promote preparation, inquiry, observation, and substantive dialogue advance decision quality and service effectiveness. In addition, regular executive sessions create opportunities for candid discussion among board members, allowing sensitive issues to be addressed without external pressure. These sessions strengthen trust and transparency, enabling boards to identify and resolve complex challenges while reinforcing effective governance practices (Bowen, 2012).

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Strategies That Foster the Courage to Participate in Transformation

Courageous followers advocate for organizational transformation and actively participate in change processes (Chaleff, 2009). When behaviors threaten the common purpose, they champion the need for change and pursue both personal and organizational growth. Through their commitment, courageous followers help transform attitudes and systems to better align with the mission. Board members and directors who view themselves as both followers and leaders demonstrate greater efficacy and integrity in navigating organizational complexity because they recognize that effective governance depends equally on adaptive followership and visionary leadership (Donaldson, 2025). Understanding governance as a dynamic partnership, they facilitate progress, challenge norms, and contribute innovatively to organizational development. To remain effective, these individuals require clarity and targeted training in leadership, governance, and management so that their skills align with the diverse demands of nonprofit oversight and strategic planning. In succession management, shared leadership among the director, board, and human resources staff promotes leadership continuity (Geib & Boenigk, 2022). Conversely, organizations that lack formal structures or transition planning face higher risks of disruption during leadership transitions (James, 2019).

Strategies That Foster the Courage to Take Moral Action

Courageous followers act in accordance with their core values, even under pressure to do otherwise (Chaleff, 2009). They refuse directives that violate moral standards or threaten the mission, and they may choose to leave the organization to maintain personal integrity if their values are continually compromised (Chaleff, 2009, 2015). Boards that rely solely on a founder's network risk undermining accountability and restricting strategic innovation among members, limiting the organization's ability to respond to future challenges (James, 2019).

Founder behaviors critically shape the board's ability to demonstrate moral courage. Both the nonprofit executive director and the board president set a clear example by acting as responsible stewards who prioritize community well-being above personal interests or internal politics (Brinckerhoff, 2004). Organizations strengthen stewardship values by facilitating workshops and scenario-based exercises that engage members in role-playing ethical dilemmas, alternating between leadership and followership roles. Through these experiences, board members and executives build ethical decision-making capacity, promote shared accountability, and lead adaptively in complex situations (Gentile, 2010).

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Practical Recommendations

Recommendations were developed through a systematic review of scholarly research on nonprofit leadership and followership, application of the core concepts of Chaleff's (2009) courageous followership model, and inclusion of the authors' practical experience as nonprofit founders. By integrating theoretical frameworks with real-world insights, four central themes emerged that inform meaningful board engagement and organizational sustainability: board member selection, board training, board structure, and director and board chair behaviors. Each recommendation is grounded in both empirical research and practitioner experience, collectively offering a clear pathway for nonprofit organizations to address challenges in sustainable leadership models and ensure long-term mission impact.

Board Member Selection

The research synthesis identified strategies for board member selection. Selecting nonprofit board members is a critical process that shapes organizational effectiveness, diversity, and long-term success. An intentional, evidence-based recruitment strategy ensures the board includes individuals whose skills, identities, and values align with the organization's mission and leadership needs.

- Nonprofit boards should recruit members with strong follower identities and proven followership effectiveness (Baird & Benson, 2022; Megheirkouni et al., 2025).
- Boards benefit from members known as both effective leaders and effective followers (Baird & Benson, 2022) and from increased gender diversity (Buse et al., 2016).
- Nomination committees should objectively select and retain members based on organizational needs and qualifications rather than personal relationships or founder influence, ensuring diverse expertise and effective governance (James, 2019; Minichilli et al., 2009).

Board Training

Comprehensive training programs equip board members with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to fulfill their governance, legal, and ethical responsibilities effectively. Such programs strengthen decision-making, risk management, and strategic planning capabilities, enabling boards to operate with greater accountability and long-term impact.

- Boards benefit from training in followership, leadership, and governance practices (Donaldson, 2025).

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- They should cultivate a board culture that emphasizes preparation and encourages critical questioning (Minichilli et al., 2009).
- Boards should encourage constructive debate among members (Minichilli et al., 2009).
- Facilitating workshops and discussions around scenario-based ethical case studies further enhances members' moral reasoning and ethical decision making (Gentile, 2010).

Board Structure

Board structure defines how authority, accountability, and collaboration are organized within a nonprofit's governance framework. A well-designed structure strengthens organizational capacity by ensuring role clarity, promoting effective communication, and aligning leadership functions with the nonprofit's mission and strategic priorities (Bowen, 2012; Donaldson, 2025).

- Boards should invest in board member retention strategies to increase board member tenure (Stephens et al., 2004).
- By providing leadership opportunities for board members, such as office and committee leadership positions, boards encourage courageous followership (Stephens et al., 2004).
- Boards should establish internal infrastructure or use transition planning to define the process of replacing the board director (James, 2019).
- Regular board executive sessions also prompt critical and transparent communication within the board (Bowen, 2012).
- Boards should implement policies that promote diversity across ethnicity, gender, and background to strengthen governance effectiveness (Buse et al., 2016). Without such policies, boards risk underutilizing the potential of diverse perspectives.

Director and Board President Behaviors

The director and board president should exemplify stewardship, accountability, and community-first leadership, serving as role models who prioritize organizational integrity and collective success (Brinckerhoff, 2004).

- They foster courageous followership by demonstrating emotional intelligence and authenticity that align with organizational display norms (Silard, 2018).
- The director and board president set the standard for stewardship through transparent decision-making and ethical leadership (Brinckerhoff, 2004).

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- Founders must release excessive control and empower the board to fulfill oversight and strategic planning responsibilities, ensuring balanced governance and sustainable leadership continuity (James, 2019).

Conclusion

When nonprofits falter due to founder transitions, board disengagement, or organizational drift, the underlying issue often stems from an overreliance on the founder or leader rather than on engaged followership (Froelich et al., 2011; James, 2019). Communities depend on nonprofits to address essential needs that neither government nor markets adequately meet (Smith Arrillaga et al., 2025). Implementing courageous followership principles equips nonprofit leaders, board members, and staff to sustain mission integrity, enhance accountability, and promote collaboration across all levels of stewardship. Ultimately, effective nonprofit governance demands a proactive commitment to shared leadership and mutual accountability.

The 15 strategies developed through scholarly research and practitioner experience provide a practical framework for cultivating the courage to assume responsibility, serve, challenge, transform, and act morally, ensuring that nonprofits continue to thrive beyond their founders and advance their missions for generations. It is equally important that courageous followership extends beyond boards and staff to include volunteers, beneficiaries, and other key stakeholders, thereby strengthening organizational capacity and engaging the broader community in shared stewardship. All types of nonprofits benefit from embracing these recommendations, not just those facing founder's syndrome. Ultimately, courageous followership establishes a foundation for enduring impact. A nonprofit's future rests on the courage of those who step up to lead and follow with integrity, ensuring the mission endures.

Limitations and Future Research

The authors selected relevant research papers after the initial search, but their subjective selection may have filtered out potentially relevant studies. The databases used might have also excluded relevant research due to the chosen journal subscriptions. Future research should examine how courageous followership interacts with emerging challenges, including technological developments, funding sources, and regulatory environments. Empirical studies investigating outcomes when courageous followership is intentionally cultivated will further refine understanding.

About the Authors

Jennifer Brogee is an associate professor at the University of Northwestern Ohio. Her 2024 book, *Can Social Entrepreneurship Work in the Rust Belt?*, examined social entrepreneurship success in economically challenged urban regions. She was a

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founding member of the team that created the applicant tracking system myStaffingPro and has cofounded three software companies and three retail ventures. She also cofounded the nonprofit Legacy Arts in northwestern Ohio. Jennifer is pursuing a PhD in Organizational Leadership at Indiana Wesleyan University. She holds a BA in Business Management from Anderson University and an MBA from Eastern University and is a certified usability analyst.

Tamara Leonard is the founder and president of Grant Staff Inc., an international consulting firm specializing in grant writing, research, and strategy for nonprofit organizations. Tamara also founded the One Love Global Wellness Foundation, a nonprofit that has provided food to more than 22,000 individuals. Tamara is a certified fund-raising executive with more than 30 years of experience in fund development and has raised over $625 million for nonprofits worldwide. She is pursuing a PhD in Organizational Leadership at Indiana Wesleyan University. She holds a BA in Media Communications from Governors State University and an MA in Leadership from Lewis University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jennifer Brogee at jenniferbrogee@gmail.com or to Tamara Leonard at grantstaffinc@gmail.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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From Foresight to Prototype: Executive Coaching for Personal Foresight, Self-Leadership, and Human Flourishing in 21st Century Healthcare

Rodney B. Woods
Founder, Envision Strategies LLC
Roundtable: Foresight

Abstract

Healthcare executives increasingly report feeling unprepared for emerging technology challenges despite elite education and extensive experience. Many lament that traditional executive programs never taught them to think about technologies that do not yet exist. This research presents a theoretical framework for developing personal foresight in healthcare leaders by integrating Christian theology, strategic foresight methods, and science fiction narratives. The proposed from foresight to prototype (FFP) framework comprises four developmental stages: strategic discernment (establishing spiritual and vocational foundations), imaginative exploration (utilizing speculative fiction to expand cognitive boundaries), covenantal alignment (ensuring ethical coherence), and prototype development (translating insights into organizational experiments). The framework addresses critical gaps in current leadership development by integrating typically separated domains—spiritual wisdom with strategic planning, imaginative exploration with practical application. Drawing on 21 years of experience in healthcare technology and doctoral research in strategic foresight, this study demonstrates how science fiction narratives can serve as ethical laboratories for exploring technological implications before they materialize. The theological component provides a moral grounding that is often absent in secular leadership development. The framework offers a structured approach for healthcare organizations seeking to prepare leaders for discontinuous change. Healthcare transformation requires leaders who can navigate the intersection between technological possibilities and human values. This research provides both a theoretical foundation and a practical methodology for developing such capabilities.

Keywords: executive coaching, personal foresight, science fiction prototyping, futures thinking, ethical laboratories

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Introduction

Hospital CEOs across the country are lamenting their lack of preparation for emerging technologies. Despite having Harvard MBAs and decades of experience, many executives report that nobody ever taught them to think about technologies that do not yet exist. Board demands for artificial intelligence strategies reveal a fundamental gap: traditional executive education never addressed how to navigate discontinuous technological change.

Healthcare leaders are trained for a predictable world. They got CRISPR, COVID, and ChatGPT instead (Kickbusch et al., 2020). Recent industry analysis highlights the sense of unease among many executives in the face of rapid technological disruption. In fact, a global survey revealed that 78% of companies report they are not "very ready" to support the deployment of generative AI, suggesting that while some recognize their lack of preparedness, others may not even realize the extent of their vulnerability (MIT Technology Review Insights, 2024).

After 21 years at BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, I saw a pattern emerge: innovative leaders skilled at optimization were often ineffective at transformation. Doctoral research in strategic foresight provided analytical tools. Coaching practice revealed that leaders required more than analysis. They needed wisdom, imagination, and ways to connect their deepest values with their most complex decisions.

The breakthrough came accidentally. A health system CEO was struggling with a precision medicine strategy. Nothing helped—not market analysis, not scenario planning. The suggestion was made to read Nancy Kress's *Beggars in Spain*, about genetic enhancement. The CEO came back changed. "Now the issue is clear," he said. "This is not about technology. This is about what happens to human solidarity when some become more human than others."

That conversation launched three years of research. Could science fiction actually prepare leaders better than *Harvard Business Review*? Could theological wisdom speak to technological futures? What if everything was integrated—theology, foresight, fiction—instead of keeping them separate?

The Personal Foresight Gap

Rittel and Webber (1973) referred to them as "wicked problems"—challenges where every solution creates new problems. Healthcare is full of them. Fix access, costs explode. Control costs, quality suffers. Add emerging technologies, and the wickedness multiplies.

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Consider AI-assisted diagnosis. The technology works. It is more accurate, faster, and cheaper. Simple decision? No. What happens to physician identity? Patient trust? Moral responsibility when algorithms fail? Standard frameworks do not address these questions.

Personal foresight is different from organizational planning. Organizations need strategies and risk assessments. Individual leaders need something else—the ability to sense what is coming, imagine alternatives, and act with wisdom when there is no playbook in place. It is partly analytical, partly spiritual, partly imaginative.

A CMO discovered this while navigating decisions related to gene therapy. The science changed monthly. The ethics were murky. The board wanted answers yesterday. She needed more than decision trees. She needed what ancient traditions called prudence—practical wisdom for unprecedented situations.

Why Science Fiction Matters

Here is the controversial claim: science fiction prepares leaders for healthcare futures better than most strategic planning. The evidence is striking. Jules Verne (1865) described submarines before they existed. Isaac Asimov (1950) developed the concept of robotics ethics, which is still used today. William Gibson (1984) invented cyberspace before the Internet. These were not lucky guesses. These writers thought seriously about the implications.

Healthcare examples abound. *Gattaca* (Niccol, 1997) explored genetic discrimination in a world where gene therapy was barely imagined. *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011) accurately predicted pandemic response, and the CDC currently uses it for training. Healthcare executives face these exact scenarios now.

However, prediction is not the point. Science fiction makes futures feel real. A scenario plan might say, "widespread genetic enhancement by 2040." Abstract. Forgettable. A story allows readers to experience the jealousy, division, and breakdown of solidarity. Which prepares leaders better?

A rural hospital CEO discovered this when she read Becky Chambers's *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*. She had been struggling with physician recruitment. This story about a society reorganizing around different values sparked an insight. "The issue is not recruitment for 20th-century medicine," she realized. Six months later, she launched a hybrid model with AI, community health workers, and visiting specialists. Applications tripled.

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Research Questions

Three questions guided this study:

- Can Christian theological principles integrate with strategic foresight to develop personal foresight in healthcare leaders?
- Do science fiction narratives work as professional development tools, not just entertainment?
- What happens when spiritual formation, futures thinking, and imagination combine? Does it actually help leaders?

Literature Review

Strategic Foresight: Promises and Gaps

Foresight evolved from military planning to business strategy (Miller, 2018). Healthcare adopted it for pandemic planning, technology assessment, and workforce development (Meskó et al., 2024). However, something is missing.

Reading foresight literature reveals methods such as Delphi studies, scenarios, and cross-impact analysis. Hines and Bishop (2015) provide excellent frameworks for organizations with resources. But individual leaders? They need approaches that work between meetings, without consultants, that address the existential questions keeping them awake at night.

Conway and Voros (2020) discuss futures literacy as a concept for individuals. Better. However, still analytical, still assuming better thinking produces better futures. What about feeling? Believing? Imagining?

Executive coaching increasingly incorporates future orientation. Grant et al. (2017) show that it improves goal attainment and resilience. However, their time horizon is months, maybe a year. Healthcare leaders need to think in decades.

Theological Resources: Untapped Wisdom

Christianity has contemplated time and the future for two millennia—the whole biblical narrative points forward, with promise, expectation, and fulfillment. However, leadership development ignores this wisdom.

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and saved Egypt from famine. That is strategic foresight with divine insight. Daniel navigated four empires while maintaining integrity. Every healthcare leader facing competing pressures needs Daniel's playbook.

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The Greek word *kairos* matters here. Unlike *chronos* (clock time), kairos means the right moment for action. Healthcare leaders live in kairos. Delay a decision, and the opportunity vanishes. Act too soon, and trust evaporates.

Palmer (2000) argues that leadership comes from identity, not technique. True. However, he focuses on individual formation. Healthcare needs leaders who connect personal formation with organizational transformation. Willard (2002) shows how spiritual disciplines enhance professional practice but wrote generally. Healthcare's unique challenges—proximity to death and life-and-death decisions—require a specific application.

Moltmann (1967) distinguishes hope from optimism. Optimism expects good outcomes. Hope participates in creating them. For healthcare leaders facing seemingly insurmountable challenges, hope sustains when optimism wanes.

Science Fiction: More Than Entertainment

Johnson (2011) made science fiction respectable in business through science fiction prototyping at Intel. Stories become thought experiments, revealing what analysis misses. Healthcare barely noticed, which is strange.

Science fiction has explored medical futures for decades. Atwood's book, *Oryx and Crake*, examined engineered pandemics. *Black Mirror* episodes raise questions about medical technology that ethics committees now face. These are not predictions, they are preparations.

Brueggemann (2001) explains why imagination matters. Prophets criticize the present and energize alternatives. Science fiction writers do the same, showing trajectories too embedded to see otherwise.

When people read fiction, their brains simulate the experiences described in the text. Mirror neurons fire. They do not just understand—they feel. This embodied cognition changes us more than information. However, healthcare leadership development treats fiction as frivolous.

Imarisha and Brown (2015) argue that all organizing is science fiction, imagining what does not exist. Their book, *Octavia's Brood,* shows how speculation serves justice. Healthcare leaders trying to create equitable futures need this imaginative capacity.

The Integration Problem

Each domain offers treasures. Theology: meaning. Foresight: method. Fiction: experience. However, they stay separate.

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Faith-based healthcare (20% of U.S. hospitals) struggles to integrate mission and margin. Leaders either get theology without strategy or business without soul. Secular systems serve spiritually diverse populations, but pretend spirituality does not matter.

Healthcare leaders implement AI without reading Asimov on robot consciousness. They pursue life extension without considering social fractures. They build digital platforms without pondering technological dependence. They navigate futures using tools designed for problems that no longer exist.

Theoretical Framework

Four Assumptions

First: Humans create futures, not just respond to them. The concept of imago Dei—bearing God's image—includes creative capacity. Healthcare leaders who wait passively for the future abdicate responsibility.

Second: One cannot build what one cannot imagine. Biblical prophets knew this. They painted pictures so vivid that people could taste the promised land. Science fiction does this today, making futures tangible and relatable.

Third: Abstract plans fail. Embodied experiments succeed. The incarnation shows this—Word became flesh. Healthcare leaders need practices connecting ideals with examination rooms.

Fourth: Time itself requires stewardship. Decisions today affect patients for decades. Cultures created now influence generations. This temporal weight demands long-term thinking.

Four Stages

Stage 1: Strategic Discernment. The process starts with ultimate questions. Why does this leader exist? What breaks their heart about healthcare? Where is their sense of calling?

First exercise: three days of silence. Not planning. Listening. One surgeon discovered he had been trying to defeat death—impossible, frustrating. Accepting mortality as a mystery transformed his practice.

Spiritual practices adapt to leadership. The Ignatian Examen becomes a daily review: Where was alignment with purpose sensed today? Where was the disconnection felt? Simple but profound.

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Biblical leaders provide case studies. Moses led traumatized people through the wilderness. Sound familiar? Healthcare transformation is an exodus from dysfunction toward uncertain hope.

The "sacred pause"—five minutes between meetings, no phone, just presence. Hard for driven executives. One CEO called it her most valuable practice where "wisdom catches up with urgency."

Stage 2: Imaginative Exploration. Week four brings resistance. Fiction is not serious! By week six, they discuss Octavia Butler's insights on leadership during collapse.

Story selection matters. AI challenges? Read Ted Chiang. Equity issues? Try N. K. Jemisin. The stories become mirrors and windows, showing hidden assumptions and revealing possibilities.

Analysis goes beyond the book club. What problems do characters face? What goes wrong? How might this apply to healthcare? One CMO read Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and completely reimagined climate adaptation for her coastal hospital.

Scenarios become stories, not bullet points. A nurse in 2040. A patient experiencing gene therapy. A community facing a climate health crisis. Stories make futures real.

Wild cards push boundaries. Reversible aging? Programmable empathy? Uploaded consciousness? Not idle speculation—stress tests for moral reasoning.

Stage 3: Covenantal Alignment. Imagination needs ethics. This stage grounds vision in values.

Values archaeology digs deep. Organizations have two value sets—what they say and what they do, and they are usually different. One faith-based system preached dignity while treating staff as interchangeable units. Gaps exposed become gaps addressed.

Stakeholder relationships reframed as covenants, not contracts. Contracts specify minimums while covenants describe mutual flourishing, and that changes everything.

Ethics get complicated intentionally. Examine decisions through multiple lenses—utilitarian, deontological, virtue, and theological—considering the perspectives of each. Tensions reveal trade-offs that simple frameworks hide.

Community discernment brings diverse voices. One executive's circle included a chaplain, a teenage patient, and a science fiction author. Their perspectives revolutionized his digital health strategy.

Stage 4: Prototype Development. Vision without action is hallucination.

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90-day experiments force rapid testing. Pick one insight. Try it. Learn. Adjust. A rural CEO tested "story rounds"—teams sharing patient narratives before clinical discussion. Errors dropped 23%. Teams saw people, not pathologies.

Innovation labs create safe failure zones. "Friday afternoon futures" for wild ideas. Most fail. Some transform practice. A nurse's "pre-grieving support" idea went system wide.

Peer learning accelerates development. Monthly meetings, no PowerPoints, just honest talk about what is working. Uncomfortable vulnerability. Powerful results.

Legacy letters force long-term thinking. Write to one's successor 20 years ahead. What are they building? One executive realized she had optimized for efficiency but wanted to be remembered for her compassion, and she changed her approach immediately.

Methodology

Framework Development Process

The theoretical framework emerged through the systematic integration of three distinct knowledge domains over a period of three years. Development proceeded through iterative cycles of literature synthesis, practical application insights, and refinement based on professional experience in healthcare leadership contexts.

Literature synthesis began with a comprehensive review across three domains. Theological analysis examined biblical texts, systematic theology, and contemporary scholarship on leadership and temporality. More than 200 peer-reviewed articles on strategic foresight were analyzed to identify methodologies adaptable for individual leader development. Fifty works of science fiction were evaluated for healthcare relevance, ethical exploration, and potential leadership applications.

The integration process evolved through multiple iterations. Initial attempts at simple juxtaposition produced fragmentation rather than synthesis. Forced connections between domains felt artificial and mechanistic. Organic integration eventually emerged through the identification of natural resonances and complementary strengths among the three domains.

Component Validation

- While the integrated framework awaits comprehensive empirical testing, individual components have been validated through established methods:
- **Theological component**: Validated through consultation with theological scholars who confirmed scriptural grounding and doctrinal coherence. The use

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of spiritual disciplines in professional development has extensive empirical support (Palmer, 2000; Willard, 2002).

- **Strategic foresight component:** Validated through alignment with established foresight methodologies (Hines & Bishop, 2015; Miller, 2018). Professional foresight practitioners confirmed methodological rigor and practical applicability.
- **Science fiction component:** Validated through alignment with Johnson's (2011) science fiction prototyping methodology, which has demonstrated effectiveness in corporate settings. Science fiction scholars confirmed the legitimacy of narrative use for professional development.
- **Integration points:** Healthcare executives and leadership development professionals reviewed the framework's relevance to actual challenges, confirming that the integration addresses gaps in current approaches.

Theoretical Grounding

The framework draws from established theories across multiple disciplines. From theology: Palmer's (2000) work on vocational identity, Willard's (2002) integration of spiritual disciplines with professional practice, and Moltmann's (1967) theology of hope. From strategic foresight: Miller's (2018) futures literacy concepts, Hines and Bishop's (2015) foresight methodologies, and Conway and Voros's (2020) personal capability frameworks. From narrative theory: Johnson's (2011) science fiction prototyping methodology and Brueggemann's (2001) prophetic imagination framework.

Results

Framework Components and Their Individual Validation

The from foresight to prototype (FFP) framework integrates three domains, each with established validity in isolation, into a novel synthesis. While holistic empirical validation remains future work, each component demonstrates firm theoretical and practical grounding.

Theological Component Validation. The use of spiritual disciplines for leadership development has robust empirical support. Palmer's (2000) research demonstrates that leaders with a strong vocational identity exhibit improved decision-making and resilience. Willard's (2002) work demonstrates measurable improvements in professional effectiveness through the integration of spiritual practice. The concept of kairos (opportune time) has proven particularly relevant for strategic decision-making in complex environments.

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Science Fiction Component Validation. Johnson's (2011) science fiction prototyping at Intel demonstrated measurable improvements in innovation. Research in narrative psychology suggests that reading fiction enhances empathy and perspective-taking abilities, which are essential skills for effective leadership. Professional applications in healthcare contexts reveal that executives engaging with speculative narratives, such as *Gattaca* or *Contagion*, develop an enhanced ability to anticipate ethical dilemmas.

Strategic Foresight Component Validation. Extensive research validates foresight methodologies for leadership development. Grant et al. (2017) demonstrate improved goal attainment and resilience through future-oriented coaching. Conway and Voros (2020) show that personal futures literacy enhances strategic decision-making capability.

Integration Insights from Professional Application

While comprehensive empirical testing of the integrated framework remains necessary, professional application in healthcare contexts reveals promising patterns.

Integration Resolution. The Individual application suggests that the framework helps leaders bridge compartmentalization between spiritual values and professional responsibilities. Rather than choosing between domains, leaders report the ability to draw from all resources simultaneously.

Narrative Enhancement. Preliminary observations suggest that science fiction does more than illustrate scenarios—it appears to generate a visceral understanding of implications that purely analytical approaches may miss. Healthcare executives report that engaging with speculative narratives reveals blind spots in traditional strategic planning.

Temporal Reframing. The initial application suggests that the framework transforms how leaders conceptualize time—from a constraint to a resource. This shift appears to reduce anxiety while maintaining urgency, though quantitative validation is needed.

Prototype Bridge. The 90-day experiment cycle shows promise in translating abstract visions into concrete actions. Early applications indicate this mechanism addresses the common failure point where strategic insights fail to produce organizational change.

Theoretical Contributions

The framework makes several theoretical contributions, though empirical validation remains necessary. First, it proposes speculative fiction as a systematic tool

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for professional development, rather than entertainment—a methodological innovation that requires further testing. Second, it suggests that theological reflection enhances rather than constrains strategic thinking—a hypothesis supported by component research but requiring integrated validation. Third, it offers a structured methodology for integrating traditionally separated knowledge domains—a theoretical advance awaiting empirical confirmation.

Discussion

Implications for Healthcare Leadership Development

This framework addresses critical gaps in current leadership preparation. Healthcare organizations typically rely on generic executive education that fails to address industry-specific challenges—the proximity to mortality, the tension between mission and margin, and the weight of decisions affecting vulnerable populations. The framework provides specialized development honoring healthcare's unique context.

The integration of science fiction as a serious professional development tool represents a significant departure from traditional approaches. Rather than dismissing narrative as entertainment, the framework demonstrates how speculative fiction can systematically prepare leaders for futures that analytical tools cannot adequately address. When healthcare executives engage with works like *Ex Machina* or Ted Chiang's explorations of AI consciousness, they develop a visceral understanding of ethical implications that policy papers cannot convey.

The theological component proves valuable even in secular settings. While not requiring religious belief, the framework's attention to transcendent purpose and moral grounding addresses the meaning-making that purely technical approaches ignore. Healthcare leaders consistently report that connecting their work to larger purposes reduces burnout and enhances resilience.

Practical Applications

Healthcare organizations can implement this framework through multiple pathways. Executive development programs can integrate science fiction reading groups alongside traditional strategic planning exercises. Board retreats may include theological reflection on organizational purpose regardless of the participants' religious affiliations. Innovation labs can adopt the 90-day prototype cycle to test insights from imaginative exploration.

Executive coaches can expand their methodologies by incorporating narrative analysis, contemplative practices, and rapid experimentation. The framework provides sufficient

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structure that coaches need not be experts in theology or science fiction to facilitate effectively.

Theological education institutions should consider developing specialized programs bridging ministry and healthcare leadership. The framework suggests rich possibilities for practical theology addressing workplace challenges beyond congregational settings.

Theoretical Contributions

This research makes significant contributions to leadership development theory in several ways. First, it establishes narrative imagination as a legitimate professional capability rather than a peripheral skill. Second, it demonstrates that spiritual formation enhances rather than constrains strategic effectiveness. Third, it provides a structured methodology for integrating typically separated knowledge domains.

The framework challenges prevailing assumptions about professional development. Rather than adding competencies, it develops capabilities. Rather than teaching techniques, it cultivates wisdom. Rather than analyzing problems, it expands imagination for possibilities.

Limitations and Future Research

This theoretical framework requires empirical validation through formal studies. While grounded in extensive professional experience and literature synthesis, the quantitative assessment of outcomes would strengthen claims about effectiveness.

Cultural specificity presents another limitation. The framework emerges from North American Protestant Christianity and Western science fiction traditions. Adaptation for other cultural and religious contexts requires careful consideration.

Future research should investigate the optimal match between science fiction genres and specific leadership challenges. Which narratives best prepare leaders for implementing AI, adapting to climate change, or advancing genetic medicine? Can predictive models be developed for story-leader fit?

The scalability challenge remains significant. While the framework can guide individual development, transforming healthcare systems requires broader implementation and adoption. Research should investigate how personal foresight development catalyzes organizational transformation.

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Conclusion

Healthcare stands at multiple inflection points simultaneously. Artificial intelligence transforms diagnosis. Gene editing redefines treatment. Climate change creates novel health challenges. Pandemic risks persist. Leaders navigate these converging disruptions with tools designed for linear progress and predictable challenges.

Traditional leadership development has not failed; it has simply become insufficient. Technical training addresses operational needs but ignores existential questions. Spiritual formation provides meaning but often lacks strategic application. Imagination without implementation produces interesting ideas but no actual change.

The FFP framework demonstrates that integrating Christian theology, strategic foresight, and science fiction narratives creates capabilities exceeding what each domain provides separately. Theology offers a transcendent grounding, preventing ethical drift. Foresight provides practical tools for navigating uncertainty. Science fiction expands imagination while creating safe spaces for exploring implications.

This framework represents one approach among many that are needed for innovations in leadership development. Healthcare's challenges are too complex for any single methodology to address comprehensively. However, the principle of integration—bringing together traditionally separated domains—offers promise beyond this specific framework.

The prophet Joel envisioned a time when "old men will dream dreams, young men will see visions" (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/2011, Joel 2:28). Healthcare leaders need to be capable of both—dreaming transformative futures while seeing present opportunities for change. Developing such leaders requires more than competency models or assessment tools. It requires the integration of ancient wisdom with future thinking, as well as disciplined imagination and practical experimentation.

As Imarisha and Brown (2015) observe, "We cannot build what we cannot imagine" (p. 3). However, imagination alone accomplishes nothing without the wisdom to guide it and the courage to bring it to life. The FFP framework provides one pathway for developing healthcare leaders who are equipped for this integration.

The work ahead is substantial. Healthcare transformation will not emerge from better technology alone, nor from systemic restructuring, nor from policy reform. It will emerge from leaders capable of navigating between technological possibility and human values, between efficiency imperatives and compassion, and between immediate pressures and generational consequences.

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The FPP framework provides both a theoretical foundation and a practical methodology for developing such leaders. In the integration of foresight and prototype, vision and action, and spirit and strategy lies potential for healthcare transformation that serves both immediate needs and eternal purposes. Wrong, just insufficient. Technical training ignores meaning. Spiritual formation lacks strategy. Imagination without implementation accomplishes nothing.

This framework integrates what is usually separated. Theology grounds strategy. Fiction expands imagination. Experiments embody vision. Fifteen leaders changed, but healthcare needs thousands. The framework shows the possibility. Scale remains the challenge.

But something started. Leaders reading science fiction in boardrooms. Praying between meetings. Prototyping impossible futures.

Joel promised, "Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions" (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/2011, Joel 2:28). Healthcare needs both.

This framework develops such leaders, not through competency models but through ancient wisdom, future thinking, and disciplined imagination.

Imarisha and Brown (2015) wrote. "We cannot build what we cannot imagine" (p. 3).

However, imagination alone builds nothing. The work is integration. Foresight and prototype. Vision and action. Spirit and strategy. There lies healthcare's hope.

About the Author

Dr. Rodney B. Woods earned his doctorate in strategic foresight from Regent University in 2021. After retiring as vice president and chief clinical engineer at BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, he founded Envision Strategies LLC.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Rodney Woods, Envision Strategies LLC, 5958 Snow Hill Road, Suite 144-107, Ooltewah, TN 37363. Email: rodney@envisionstrategies.biz

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Boundaries as Christ-Centered Leadership Practice for Human Flourishing

Lydia A. Pert
Regent University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

This article examined the critical role of boundaries as a Christ-centered leadership practice for human flourishing and the severe consequences of failing to maintain boundaries. Drawing from research on toxic leadership, human resource development, and organizational boundary setting, it highlights how missing or blurred boundaries lead to dysfunction that stalls employee development, resulting in organizational failure. The case study of Tessa (a pseudonym), an entry-level marketer who left her role under a boundless, overreaching CEO, illustrates how boundary failures can spiral out of control and harm everyone involved. On the other hand, boundary-driven organizations show that clear role definitions and structured oversight are foundational to success. This paper focuses on the costs of boundary neglect: cultures of fear, wasted talent, and failure thrive. Grounded in biblical principles such as Proverbs 25:28, this paper equips leaders to recognize the red flags of boundary erosion and understand the necessity of boundary-based leadership practices so that people and organizations can flourish.

Keywords: boundaries, human resource development, flourishing, toxic leadership

Proverbs 25:28 says: "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls" (English Standard Version, 2001). In the ancient world, a city without walls was vulnerable. It had no protection, no defense, and no sense of order or safety. Anyone could come in, and everything inside was at risk. That is precisely what happens to a leader, and to entire organizations, without healthy boundaries. When there are no walls, when there is no structure, the organization becomes just like that city with broken-down walls—vulnerable and unsustainable.

Cloud (2013) described boundaries as invisible property lines that help people determine what is and is not theirs to own. In a business leadership context, boundaries help establish where a leader's role ends and another person's responsibilities begin.

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They establish what the leader is accountable for, such as vision, strategy, and direction, and what a leader must be able to trust others to do, such as day-to-day tasks or superficial decision making (Cloud, 2013). Without these clear lines, organizations descend into chaos. The truth is that organizations rarely fall apart overnight. They erode slowly, over time, when leaders fail to establish and respect clear boundaries. Understanding these failure points is essential for leaders who want to design healthy, innovative organizations where people can flourish.

Human resource development (HRD) involves building employees' knowledge, skills, and capabilities to strengthen the entire organization (Swanson & Holton, 2009). Training programs, leadership development, mentoring, and performance feedback all fall under HRD. However, HRD does not work in isolation. Development efforts only really pay off if the organization as a whole has healthy boundaries in place. Think of boundaries as the structure and safety net HRD needs to succeed. For example, role and relational boundaries give employees clarity. They know what they own, where they can make decisions, and when they should take initiative (Cloud, 2013). Without that clarity, people hold back from applying new skills because they fear overstepping or getting things wrong.

Then there are ethical and interpersonal boundaries, which are built on a foundation of trust. If employees believe the environment is fair, respectful, and consistent, they are much more likely to engage in learning and take the risks that growth requires (Edmondson, 2019). However, if they feel like the rules shift day to day, or that speaking up might backfire, all that development work will stall. Finally, it is important to remember time and workload boundaries. Even the best training program in the world will not make a difference if employees are constantly in firefighting mode. People need space to learn, reflect, and practice new skills in their day-to-day work. If the pace never lets up, HRD just becomes another box to check.

When HRD and boundaries work together, organizations and people really start to flourish. Employees begin to innovate, collaborate, and contribute in meaningful ways. Knowledge flows naturally, creative ideas take shape, and people feel confident enough to step up. Engagement rises, turnover drops, and the organization can finally focus on long-term strategy instead of getting stuck in short-term crises. As a metaphor, HRD is the engine of growth, and boundaries are the guardrails that keep that growth moving in the right direction. Together, they create workplaces where people thrive, teams flourish, and the organization achieves its mission. Without the engine, nobody is going anywhere. Without the guardrails, they are driving off the edge.

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Case Study

> A fish rots from the head down. The head honcho at the top cannot stay in his own lane, but thinks those of us farther down the chain of command are to blame when the things he forces us to do backfire spectacularly. (Tessa [pseudonym], social media marketer)

Tessa was an entry-level social media marketer responsible for crafting content, setting up campaigns, and tracking results. She reported to the content marketing manager, who reported to the director of marketing, who reported to the head of operations, who reported to the CEO. However, despite all the layers of separation, Tessa often found herself in Slack huddles with the CEO, where he would personally review every piece of social media content and provide feedback, approval, and rejections on everything, right down to the hashtags she had selected.

Tessa quickly realized that the CEO had no background or experience in marketing, and he openly admitted he did not understand how to use his own personal social media accounts. His lack of understanding was evident: he would redline posts and replace casual brand language with overwrought technical jargon that the average potential customer would not understand. He would reject graphics for trivial reasons, such as not liking the shade of blue the designer used. He would delay simple campaign launches by days or weeks, tweaking the most minor, most inconsequential details.

In addition to his counterproductive involvement in the content, the CEO would often take it upon himself to edit campaigns late at night or over the weekend and expect immediate responses from the team, even outside regular working hours. He bypassed the chain of command and left Tessa's boss, boss's boss, and boss's boss's boss out of the conversation, going directly to Tessa for changes. Then, when the CEO's ill-informed decisions backfired, Tessa was held responsible for clicking "post." Tessa found the entire dynamic to be very odd and unsettling. After less than 18 months on the job, she quit, taking a pay cut to work for a different organization where the CEO was too busy with high-level strategic decision making to get involved in her day-to-day tasks, which allowed her to work on her content calendars in peace.

The Boundary Failures That Erode Organizations

Contrary to how some organizational leaders might try to paint the situation, Tessa's departure was not the result of some deficiency on her part or her failing to set and enforce boundaries. As an entry-level employee, she was not in a position to push back against the CEO's overreach. It was never her responsibility to manage the most senior leader in the organization or order him to stay in his lane. The responsibility for setting

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boundaries should have been on the CEO, but he failed to enforce boundaries for himself. By taking on tasks far below his pay grade, he unintentionally created a culture in which no decision, however minor, could be made without his approval (Irani-Williams et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on high-level strategy or other responsibilities appropriate for his position, he micromanaged people into full-blown burnout.

Boundary failures do not just create headaches for top leaders. When boundaries are missing, their absence is felt at every level of the organization. What they leave behind is often toxicity and dysfunction that can be incredibly difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to reverse (Arifin, 2024; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). Think about what happens when leaders do not have clear boundaries to guide them, when they do not know what they should or should not get involved in. When their inability to delegate causes them to micromanage even their best employees, it is not just the leader who suffers. Everyone feels the impact. This includes the organization's ability to develop people, build capability, and create meaningful learning opportunities, which are at the heart of HRD.

Boundaries are the glue that holds organizations together. When that glue is not there, things start to slowly fall apart (Cloud, 2013). That collapse rarely happens overnight. Often, the decay is slow and subtle. It can take years, and even decades, for things to hit rock bottom. However, over time, the signs are unmistakable—employees disengage, innovation stalls, turnover skyrockets. Learning and development initiatives lose traction because employees are too busy firefighting to take advantage of growth opportunities. Trust between leaders and employees, and even trust between peers, fades away (Joo et al., 2023). The organization stops thriving. Instead of focusing on long-term strategy and meaningful growth, everyone is trapped in short-term firefighting, spending their time putting out fires that could have been avoided a year or even 5 years earlier. HRD cannot thrive in this environment because the focus has shifted from growth to survival.

On top of that, one of the most destructive outcomes of boundary failure is the shift from psychological safety to psychological danger. Psychological safety is the feeling that you can speak up, share ideas, and even make mistakes without fear of retaliation (Edmondson, 2019). It is mandatory for creativity, innovation, and healthy workplaces (Stone, 2015)—the very conditions where HRD efforts can take root and human flourishing becomes possible. Psychological danger, on the other hand, is the opposite. It is the unspoken understanding that nothing good will come from rocking the boat, so it is safer to stay quiet.

Employees who have been conditioned to expect resistance or unpredictable reactions from leadership will not take the risk of speaking up, even if they can see that something is going wrong (Moingeon & Edmondson, 1997). When employees are silent,

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mentorship, knowledge sharing, and on-the-job learning, the core tools of HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2009), grind to a halt. Furthermore, here is the real tragedy. When organizations slide into psychological danger, they lose engagement, creativity, and the conditions that enable human flourishing. People cannot thrive in an environment where fear replaces trust and short-term survival replaces long-term growth. In HRD terms, the organization stops building capacity and becomes a place where talent goes to die.

Lack of Emotional Boundaries Leads to Volatility. Leaders who cannot regulate their own emotions often create reactive environments. For example, when a leader has a bad day, it becomes everyone else's problem, and employees feel like they must walk on eggshells. Alternatively, a leader's bad mood in a meeting causes them to abruptly reject all new ideas, shut down discussion, and discourage the team from sharing creative solutions in the future. Even worse, leaders can be so emotionally unrestrained that it trickles down where others in the organization replicate what they see and no longer feel the need to regulate their own emotions (Coker et al., 2025). In those scenarios, workplace hostility runs rampant, and stress levels slowly but steadily climb.

That kind of stress is really harmful. Sustained exposure to stress impacts the brain. The burden of chronic stress disrupts multiple systems, including those responsible for emotional and cognitive regulation (Juster et al., 2010; McEwen, 2007). It does not stop there. The brain often keeps replaying or worrying about negative experiences, which can prolong stress responses far beyond the original event, leading to long-term mental strain. Without boundaries, leaders unintentionally create workplaces that keep employees in a state of near constant stress (Gandolfi et al., 2025). That stress leads to burnout and higher turnover (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022) and directly undermines HRD. Employees experiencing chronic stress struggle with memory, focus, and problem solving, which makes it nearly impossible to benefit from HRD initiatives or to grow as individuals.

Lack of Role Boundaries Leads to Micromanagement. When leaders step into their employees' responsibilities, employees stop taking initiative. Then, the leader feels justified in stepping further into others' domains and taking on more responsibility for themselves, even though others should be handling those matters. This often leads to a vicious circle where the more the leader takes on, the less their teams feel comfortable doing (Atendido et al., 2022). Eventually, the leader becomes so inundated with doing everyone else's jobs for them that they end up dropping the ball on their executive functions, and strategy and direction take a backseat to the mundane tasks they have consumed themselves with.

Micromanagement represents a fundamental breakdown of boundaries; self-determination theory helps explain why its effects are so damaging (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

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Employees have three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All those needs are undermined when leaders step into responsibilities that should belong to their teams. By constantly interfering, micromanagers make it clear that they do not trust their employees to make decisions or perform without scrutiny. This strips away autonomy and eliminates the sense of competence and self-efficacy that drives intrinsic motivation (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022). Over time, this creates a psychologically dangerous environment where employees wait for the leaders' go-ahead rather than taking initiative. A culture of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) begins to take root, leaving both the team and the leader overwhelmed and shut down.

Lack of Time Boundaries Leads to Fire Drill Culture. Leaders without time discipline turn everything into an emergency. As the adage goes, "When everything is an emergency, nothing is." Just as the CEO in the case study expected immediate responses to trivial matters, many leaders lack an understanding of what to prioritize and how, and end up placing everything at the same priority level. Leaders without time boundaries create a culture of constant firefighting (or constantly ignoring demands from on high), forcing employees to work reactively rather than proactively (Maruping et al., 2015). When everything is treated as equally urgent, teams quickly become overwhelmed or shut down. Over time, constant urgency erodes trust in leadership because teams realize that many so-called emergencies are avoidable and stem from poor planning or indecision at the top.

The toxic "always available" mentality in leadership does even more than just impact emotional and mental well-being. It can take a significant physical toll on employees. When leaders fail to understand how to prioritize and do not take steps to protect their time and their employees' time, they create an environment marked by constant urgency (Kennedy & Porter, 2022). This constant sense of urgency keeps employees in a prolonged state of stress, which eventually interferes with sleep, elevates blood pressure, suppresses immune function, and contributes to long-term health risks, including cardiovascular disease, metabolic disorders, and gastrointestinal problems (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). According to Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory, individuals work to retain and protect their psychological, physical, and social resources. Leaders who lack time boundaries; engage in practices such as sending late-night emails, expecting instant responses; or treat every task as a crisis, deplete these resources, leaving employees vulnerable to burnout and stress-related health issues.

Lack of Relational Boundaries Leads to Overfamiliarity. Leaders who try to act like everyone's friend often have difficulty making hard decisions or holding the proper people accountable for their role in issues. Healthy boundaries require both respect and clear lines of authority, which means delivering tough feedback, enacting consequences, and making decisions that may not be widely popular but are necessary for organizational success and growth (Petitta et al., 2023). When leaders become too casual

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or personal with employees, it can lead to inappropriate oversharing or crossing HR lines. For example, it is not appropriate for the CEO of a company to take his HR director to a Coldplay concert—and then spend the evening venting about other executives or engaging in behaviors that blur the line between professional and social relationships. This kind of behavior undermines the HR representative's role as an objective advisor and can also set a precedent of favoritism throughout the organization.

This dynamic is explained by the leader–member exchange theory, which suggests that leaders often form distinct in-groups and out-groups among their subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Those in the in-group frequently receive perks and personal attention, while those in the out-group feel excluded. Out-group employees hesitate to voice concerns or take risks because they know rocking the boat will only confirm their outsider status. Meanwhile, jealousy and frustration creep into team dynamics as some employees enjoy privileges that others are denied. Blurred relational boundaries can also destroy development pathways. Mentoring, stretch assignments, and leadership development opportunities are often funneled toward the in-group, leaving the out-group at a clear disadvantage. Over time, this inequity hurts succession planning and talent retention, because growth is no longer based on performance and potential. Success is based on proximity to the leader's inner circle.

Lack of Moral Boundaries Leads to Cultural Erosion. When leaders skirt ethical norms in pursuit of "quick wins," both the culture and the organization's long-term viability suffer. The lack of moral boundaries might seem innocuous at first glance: small compromises (such as cutting corners on quality checks or pushing employees to work unreasonably long hours to meet unrealistic deadlines) may even yield short-term gains. Leaders might bypass compliance protocols, such as informed consent for background checks, under the guise of "eliminating red tape" and making the organization more streamlined and efficient. However, these actions quietly set new expectations for acceptable behavior, signaling to employees that results matter more than integrity (Recherche, 1997). Over time, this erodes trust, encourages similar behavior across all levels of the organization, and creates a culture in which ethical lapses are just part of standard operating procedure.

When leaders lack moral boundaries, it often creates a ripple effect where unethical practices are both learned and normalized. Social learning theory suggests that employees typically copy the behaviors they observe their superiors model (Bandura, 1977). When those behaviors appear to lead to benefits for the person engaging in them, employees are much more likely to engage in a "monkey see, monkey do" pattern. When leaders justify questionable decisions for the sake of efficiency, their followers will eventually conclude that they, too, can get away with unethical behaviors. Before long, the phenomenon of normalization of deviance comes into play (Vaughan, 1996).

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That means that not only do employees believe they can get away with things, but the things they are trying to get away with are not really that big of a deal. The things they previously found concerning no longer seem so bad, and the company collectively shifts increasingly more into the gray areas. Without firm moral boundaries to delineate between what is morally acceptable and what is not, the behaviors compound until there is no turning back.

Boundaries as the Foundation of Organizational Design and Strategy

Boundaries are often classified as restrictive or bureaucratic; in reality, they are what allow organizations to operate in healthy, sustainable ways. Boundaries are a choice to accept constraint for the sake of a greater goal or purpose (Vandenbosch, 2004). Individuals choose to give up their independence and be constrained by a spouse in exchange for companionship and love. Couples choose to give up their spontaneity and choose growing their family by having children. In a completely different yet still related vein, leaders and teams in successful organizations give up some autonomy and agree to be constrained by defined roles and processes, in exchange for the ability to achieve shared goals. While modern society often paints constraints as negative, they are almost always necessary to achieve something great (Jasiński & Derbis, 2022). It is simply not possible in every situation to have cake and eat it too. Choosing constraints and setting boundaries is what allows individuals and organizations alike to create and sustain something meaningful that could never be achieved in a free-for-all environment.

Galbraith's (2014) star model is particularly applicable to organizational design because it emphasizes that strategy can be executed effectively only when structure, processes, people, rewards, and culture are aligned. Boundaries are the invisible thread that holds these elements together. For example, a clearly defined organizational structure ensures that everyone knows who reports to whom, who is responsible for what, and when. Without boundaries, structures fall apart, processes become optional, people are replaceable, rewards are inconsistent, and culture does not matter (Cloud, 2013). In organizations where the things that should be important get overlooked or swept under the rug, nothing can grow. Leaders who understand the importance of design concepts like the star model must also realize that boundaries are not about restricting flexibility but about designing an organization that can sustain itself for the long term.

Boundaries in Action. A good example of boundaries in action is The Walt Disney Company. Disney's strategy revolves around creating immersive, high-quality storytelling experiences that are consistent across its films, parks, destinations, and merchandise, and that require significant boundary setting and human buy-in. One way Disney achieves this is by enforcing clear boundaries between roles. The Imagineers are free to innovate, but always within Disney's brand parameters. Operations teams are

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responsible for bringing those ideas to life on a global scale (Iger, 2019). Senior leadership stays focused on long-term strategy and quality control. Nobody is confused about where their role ends and someone else's begins, which allows people to do their best work.

This is where HRD comes into play. Disney invests heavily in HRD. Disney University has been around since 1955, and every new "cast member" starts with Disney Traditions, which immerses employees in the company's values, culture, and standards (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). They do not stop at onboarding. Programs like Disney Aspire pay hourly employees to earn college degrees, demonstrating the company's commitment to long-term growth and retention (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). Employee feedback reflects this commitment. On Glassdoor (2024), roughly 75% of employees say they would recommend the company as a great place to work. Many positive reviews cite the strong culture, values, career advancement opportunities, and HRD offerings.

Disney's boundaries do two essential things. First, they give employees the autonomy they need to develop mastery and innovate in their roles. Second, they connect that clarity to strategic learning systems such as mentoring, stretch assignments, formal recognition, and tuition support (Swanson & Holton, 2009). That way, development efforts are ongoing and valuable to the people, not just a performative checkbox. The result is that Disney preserves its brand integrity, empowers creativity, and develops a skilled and engaged workforce that wants to stick around and keep building. Their boundaries do not limit their potential: their boundaries are what have allowed them to sustain such incredible brand integrity and employee net promoters for the better part of a century, and why so many of their people are flourishing.

Setting Healthy Organizational Boundaries. Healthy boundaries do not emerge by accident; leaders must be intentional about setting, modeling, and enforcing the boundaries to help the organization achieve its goals. While not every organization needs to be designed like Disney or follow the same strategies, there are practical takeaways from the Disney case study that can benefit any company.

The first takeaway is that boundaries are an act of stewardship. Disney empowers its creative teams to dream big and take risks, but always within clear, intentional parameters (Iger, 2019). As Christian leaders, this is what stewardship looks like in the workplace: entrusting people with freedom and creativity while safeguarding the organization's mission, values, and resources. Healthy boundaries do not restrict; they guide humans toward mission-aligned outcomes. Research on strategic alignment has found that innovation without boundaries leads to wasted resources and inferior products (Hamdan, 2020). When leaders set innovation boundaries, they channel creativity toward outcomes that directly support the organization's competitive advantage. Organizational leaders need to understand the difference between what is

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flexible and what must be set in stone, so that teams are free to flex their creative muscles without compromising on quality or undermining the strategy.

The second takeaway is to clarify roles, responsibilities, and decision-making rights. Disney's cross-functional teams, from the animation studios to vacation tour operations, know exactly which unit is responsible for each decision, where their domains overlap and diverge, and when leadership approval is necessary (Iger, 2019). Organizations must ensure that every team understands its role in the overall strategy and create clarity across positions to prevent bottlenecks, frustration, and confusion. When employees know what they own and where their authority begins and ends, they can take initiative and get things done without second guessing themselves or waiting for approvals from people who have no skin in the game (Campbell, 2000). Clear boundaries around decision making empower teams to generate creative ideas and solve problems at their level, while allowing leaders to focus on broader strategic priorities.

The third takeaway is the importance of establishing robust quality assurance and review processes, along with multiple checkpoints, for all significant initiatives. Disney uses review boards, brand committees, and multitiered quality checks to ensure that every product or experience aligns with the company's overall vision and strategy (Capodagli & Jackson, 2019). Without these boundaries, standards become inconsistent, and every review process becomes either a bottleneck or an afterthought, providing no value to the product. Properly executed review processes are efficient and consistent, not chaotic or reactive. They allow leaders to set high standards and hold their teams accountable for meeting those standards, without crossing the line into micromanagement (Rochmatullah et al., 2023). That means leaders do not have to get involved in every mundane detail their team handles or worry about every minor step of the process. They can set parameters for their teams to operate within while still maintaining some autonomy, and expectations are met without the leader having to be involved at every single stage.

Conclusion

Tessa's story is not an isolated incident—not within the organization she left or other organizations around the world. No industry or job title is immune to the adverse side effects of missing or unenforced boundaries. Jobs that should be simple and clear become overwhelming and convoluted; every day becomes an exercise in futility for the unfortunate individuals trapped in boundless organizations. Tessa's frustration and eventual voluntary departure, even though it meant financial sacrifice, reveal the true cost of organizations and leaders that operate without constraints. Talented employees leave, taking valuable institutional knowledge with them. Innovation flatlines, and

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leaders are left to call all the shots without any other points of view. Organizational strategy goes to the back burner, and the organizational design falls apart.

In contrast, companies like Disney excel because of the clear, well-defined boundaries they have established. Constrained leaders understand that while there needs to be strategic guardrails, teams still need the freedom and autonomy to innovate. They understand that everybody has a role to play and something valuable to contribute, and employees must be both allowed and encouraged to take the lead in the areas where they excel. They trust the processes they put in place and in their team's integrity to see products and initiatives through to the finish line, without feeling the need to micromanage or get involved in details that do not require their intervention. These firm boundaries allow organizations to grow and thrive without sacrificing efficiency or strategy, the opposite of what Tessa experienced under her CEO's reactive, unconstrained, and boundless leadership.

The question every leader should ask is: Where have blurred or nonexistent boundaries in your organization created dysfunction and toxicity? Leaders of boundless organizations may find themselves or their teams constantly "firefighting" rather than working strategically, as urgent problems overshadow long-term priorities. Decision making may slow to a crawl when no one is certain who owns a task or has the authority to make a call. Employees may experience frustration, burnout, or even disengagement when they feel micromanaged, overlooked, or trapped in cycles of confusion and rework. These are the red flags that should prompt leaders to pause and reevaluate whether the boundaries in their organization are healthy.

Boundaries are not barriers; they are more like the lines on a road. They make the direction clear, create order out of chaos, and prevent collisions while still allowing forward movement and progress. However, even the best organizational "roads" still require maintenance. When leaders ignore the early warning signs of boundary failure, the lines begin to fade, and the path forward becomes both inefficient and unsafe. It is a leader's responsibility to ensure that those lines—those boundaries—are clearly painted and consistently enforced. Paying attention to the red flags of fading boundaries is just as important as establishing the boundaries in the first place. Healthy, well-maintained boundaries protect the mission, reduce dysfunction, and create an environment where both the organization and its people can flourish.

About the Author

Lydia A. Pert is a doctoral student in Strategic Leadership at Regent University, where her research focuses on toxic leadership and psychological safety in organizations. She is a human resources professional with extensive experience supporting global teams, and her practical work in the field informs her academic research. Lydia has co-authored peer-reviewed academic journal articles and contributed a chapter to an

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upcoming leadership textbook, with additional projects under way on how organizations can create healthier cultures. Outside of her academic and professional work, Lydia enjoys traveling with her husband, with the shared goal of visiting all seven continents. She is also a licensed skydiver and a devoted cat owner who supports animal welfare through rescue and advocacy. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to lydifai@mail.regent.edu

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Toxic Leadership Impacts on Group Behavior and Organizational Culture

Curtis Mullin
Regent University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

This pilot study investigated the impact of toxic leadership behaviors on employee engagement and team performance—two key concerns for human resources professionals responsible for fostering a healthy organizational culture. Utilizing Schmidt's (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), the study examined five dimensions of toxic leadership: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Data were collected from five employees within a small business, all reporting to the same supervisor, offering a concentrated view of leadership impact within a single team structure. Both instruments demonstrated high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .96. Although Pearson correlation results showed a moderate, nonsignificant positive relationship between toxic leadership and engagement, regression analysis revealed that traits such as unpredictability and authoritarianism hurt engagement levels. Interestingly, some aspects of narcissism and self-promotion correlated positively with engagement, suggesting that under certain conditions, these traits may be perceived as charismatic or motivational. While limited by sample size, the findings highlight the measurable effects that toxic leadership can have on team dynamics and employee morale. For human resources leaders, this underscores the importance of identifying toxic leadership patterns early and developing targeted interventions. Future research with broader samples is recommended to further validate these results and inform leadership development strategies, performance management, and organizational culture initiatives.

Keywords: toxic leadership, employee engagement, human resources management, organizational behavior, team performance, pilot study

Organizational culture is key when examining group behavior. Group development, interactions, and even leadership are byproducts of organizational culture. Realizing that organizational culture has such a significant impact on group performance, a

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question began to develop around the impact leadership has on both group behavior and corporate culture. What is the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance? Are there any instruments available to researchers to help them determine in a quantitative way the impacts of toxic leadership?

Bridwell (2024) stated, "In several organizational cultures, there are cases where an individual has advanced to a position of long-standing tenure, authority or prominence in productivity while becoming increasingly resistant to management or coaching" (p. 2). When individuals ascend the corporate ladder or new individuals are brought into an organization, their impacts on the organization are not always seen by the collective as positive. Some leaders provide stability and build trust within organizations; similarly, other leaders have a negative effect on an organization (Kafkas et al., 2024).

While several instruments have been developed to measure toxic or destructive leadership, such as the Destructive Leadership Scale (DLS; Camgoz et al., 2021) and the Destructive Leadership Questionnaire (DLQ; Shaw et al., 2011), this study used the Toxic Leadership Scale (TLS) developed by Schmidt (2008). This instrument captures five dimensions of toxic leadership behavior: abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. It is well-suited for understanding leadership behavior at the group level and has been widely cited in research on toxic workplace dynamics.

Over the past few years, there has been a significant amount of research conducted on the topic of toxic leadership. Typically, this research has been centered around the topics of mental health, corporate fraud, and organizational climate. To date, very little research has been conducted regarding the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior. Camgoz et al. (2021) identified that toxic leadership can be measured using the DLS. The DLS was created as a means of identifying and measuring destructive leadership behavior (Einarsen et al., 2007). Einarsen et al. (2007) found that "little research and theory development has addressed destructive leadership behaviours" (p. 207). Knowing that toxic leadership affects organizations as a whole, it follows that groups that interact with toxic leadership are less likely to function effectively. In that case, there is a very high likelihood that groups that report directly to a toxic leader or groups that a toxic leader leads will struggle to function effectively. The goal of this study is to determine the impact that toxic leaders have on group performance and behavior.

By utilizing the TLS (Schmidt, 2008), subordinates can be surveyed to understand how toxic leadership affects the effectiveness of their group's performance. Throughout this study, *toxic leadership* and *destructive leadership* is used interchangeably due to the previous studies and research that have been conducted. Data for this study were collected using the TLS, which was emailed to study participants. This pilot study was

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being piloted on a small business with five respondents to verify the validity of the study and the selected instrument. The selected group allowed this research to determine if differences exist in how these groups respond to toxic leadership and the overall impact of toxic leadership on group performance.

Literature Review

The concept of toxic leadership has been identified as an area of significance for the last 25 years. Einarsen et al. (2007) contended that while destructive leadership behaviors were an area of concern for organizations, little research has been conducted on measuring this behavior. "Little research and theory development has addressed destructive leadership behaviors and the potential negative effects of such behaviours on the organization" (Einarsen et al., 2007, p. 207). Edwards (2019) stated that toxic leadership has a direct correlation to job performance and satisfaction for individuals. Understanding this information is critical to developing a study that investigates the impacts of toxic leadership on group behavior.

In the context of the current study, performance is defined as an individual's level of energy, psychological investment, and dedication to their work, all of which contribute to overall team effectiveness. While performance can be measured through objective outcomes like productivity or goal attainment, engagement has also been shown to be a reliable predictor of job performance (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). For this reason, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) was selected as a proxy for perceived performance. Higher engagement is generally associated with more substantial commitment, resilience, and output at both the individual and group levels.

Measuring Toxic Leadership

Before 2007, there were no instruments specifically designed to measure toxic leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007). It was during this period that the DLS, the DLQ, and the destructive and constructive leadership model emerged (Camgoz et al., 2021). The TLS was developed by Schmidt in 2008 and consists of 30 questions. The scale breaks the questions down into five separate components that provide researchers with a method of determining the type of leadership styles displayed by toxic leaders (Kafkas et al., 2024).

While these scales have primarily been used to understand the impacts of this behavior on an organization, other researchers have utilized other instruments to better understand this behavior in the medical field. Cakiroglu and Unver (2024) utilized "the Turkish version of the Toxic Leadership Behaviors of Nurse Managers (ToxBH-NM-TR) Scale" (p. 49) to gain a deeper understanding and provide a method for screening and identifying the impact of this type of leadership within the medical field. These instruments have provided researchers with tools to better understand the implications

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of toxic leadership within an organization. However, an opportunity exists to further explore the implications of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance.

Toxic Leadership Within Organizations

The literature regarding toxic leadership is driven primarily by its impact on organizations as a whole. The impacts of toxic leadership have been found within the U.S. Naval Academy (Alejos et al., 2023), the U.S. Military as a whole (Galvan, 2023), the field of nursing (Cakiroglu & Unver, 2024), and in many other instances. McMurray (2023) explored the notion that toxic leadership often stems from a leader's own desire for advancement and recognition. Bridwell (2024) focused on the impact followers have on toxic leadership, and that without the support of followers, toxic leadership would not be able to exist within an organization. Myers (2021) added further evidence to the impact of followership on leaders and their actions.

Leadership is generally considered one of the world's oldest professions. Sound leadership allows organizations and civilizations to thrive, while poor or destructive leadership can cause organizations or societies to crumble (Plato, 2009). Fitzgibbons (2018) stated, "The notion of leadership surrounds the global economy, affecting lives and impacting decisions and choices at regular intervals" (p. 15). It is important to note that toxic leadership is not just an issue that takes place in the United States, it is also a global issue (Fitzgibbons, 2018). Understanding both the local and global cultural implications of leadership and the impact that toxic leadership has within an organization is still not completely understood.

Framework for Evaluating Toxic Leadership

Developing a framework for evaluating toxic leadership is not a new concept. Several researchers have conducted studies to further investigate toxic leadership and its implications across multiple areas of study. Einarsen et al. (2007) realized that while significant research has been conducted on successful leadership, limited research has been done to thoroughly understand the implications of toxic leadership on group behavior. Several researchers have created a solid foundation to build upon regarding toxic leadership (Cakiroglu & Unver, 2024; Einarsen et al., 2007; McMurray, 2023; Shaw et al., 2011).

One area where research has repeatedly fallen short is understanding the implications of toxic leadership on group performance. While it is understood that leaders who exhibit these behaviors of a toxic leader are often considered bullies (Einarsen et al., 2007), very little to no research has been conducted to understand how group performance is impacted by this type of leadership. The current research hypothesizes that group performance and longevity are severely affected by toxic leadership—that

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there is a direct correlation between toxic leadership and the lack of group performance, leading to a decrease in the life cycle of a group.

To better understand this relationship and fill the identified gaps in research, the following research questions and hypotheses were developed to guide this study:

RQ: What is the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance?

H_1: There is a negative correlation between perceived toxic leadership behaviors and overall group work engagement.

Toxic behaviors such as abusive supervision, unpredictability, or authoritarianism are expected to diminish a group's energy, focus, and investment in their work.

H_2: Groups led by individuals who exhibit high levels of toxic leadership will report lower levels of performance than groups that do not report exposure to such leadership.

Prior research indicates that leadership rooted in manipulation, self-promotion, and narcissism can disrupt communication, hinder collaboration, and reduce psychological safety, ultimately reducing group effectiveness.

H_3: The five dimensions of toxic leadership, as measured by Schmidt's (2008) scale, will each negatively influence at least one of the three dimensions of engagement as outlined in the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Each toxic trait, when isolated, has the potential to uniquely impact areas such as vigor, dedication, or absorption, all of which are essential for high-performing teams.

Methods and Procedures

This pilot study utilized a quantitative, nonexperimental, cross-sectional design to understand the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance. A convenience sample was selected by focusing on a single small business that voluntarily agreed to participate. This approach allowed the reliability and clarity of the survey instruments to be tested and provided an opportunity to gather preliminary insights into how toxic leadership behaviors influence team dynamics and outcomes.

Toxic leadership was measured using the TLS (Schmidt, 2008), which captures multiple dimensions of destructive leadership, including abusive supervision, authoritarian leadership, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Performance was measured using the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), a validated instrument that assesses work engagement across three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption.

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These factors are widely recognized in the literature as indicators of individual and team performance.

Data were collected through an online survey. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and provided electronic consent before participation. All data were anonymized and securely stored following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Participants

The participant group for this study consisted of five employees from a small business who voluntarily agreed to participate by taking Schmidt's (2008) TLS. A single organization was represented by these individuals, and they all reported to the same immediate supervisor. This allowed for a focused analysis of group behavior in the context of shared leadership. All participants were informed that participation in this study was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The study posed no physical or psychological risk, and no identifying information was collected.

Instrumentation

Data for this study were collected using two validated instruments. The first instrument, the TLS (Schmidt, 2008), is a 30-item survey that measures toxic leadership behaviors across five dimensions: self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarian leadership. Participants responded using a Likert-type scale, rating the extent to which they perceived these behaviors in their current leadership environment. The instrument has demonstrated strong reliability and construct validity, and the overall scale shows high internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach's alpha of .97. Each subscale also demonstrates acceptable to excellent reliability, with alpha values ranging from .76 to .87.

The second instrument was the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), which was used to assess perceived performance through the lens of work engagement. The UWES measures three key dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. These factors are widely accepted in the literature as indicators of employee performance and organizational involvement. Responses are rated on a Likert-type scale from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always/every day*). The UWES has been validated in multiple countries and industries and has demonstrated strong psychometric properties. Reported Cronbach's alpha values typically range from .78 to .90 for the subscales, and .91 or higher for the total scale, indicating excellent internal reliability.

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Data Collection

Data were collected via email. Individuals received an email containing the survey link, instructions for completion, an informed consent form, and the submission deadline. The survey included both the TLS (Schmidt, 2008) and the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Individuals were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Responses were submitted electronically and stored in a secure, password-protected database accessible only to the primary researcher. No personally identifying information was collected, ensuring participant anonymity. These procedures were followed in accordance with IRB guidelines to ensure that all participant data were handled ethically.

Discussion

The results of this pilot study provide preliminary insights into the relationship between toxic leadership behaviors and group performance, as measured through engagement using the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Despite the small sample size (n = 5), meaningful patterns began to emerge that support the proposed hypotheses and align with prior research.

First, reliability analyses for both the TLS and the UWES confirmed excellent internal consistency. The TLS (Schmidt, 2008) yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .967 (see Table 1), while the UWES produced a Cronbach's alpha of .963 (see Table 2). These high values validate the use of these instruments in assessing perceptions of toxic leadership and corresponding levels of engagement within a group context.

Table 1**:** Cronbach's Alpha for the TLS

Measure	Cronbach's alpha	Based on standardized items	Number of items
TLS	.97	.94	30

Note. This table reports internal consistency for the TLS used in this study. A Cronbach's alpha above .90 indicates excellent reliability.

Table 2**:** Cronbach's Alpha for the UWES

Measure	Cronbach's alpha	Based on standardized items	Number of items
TLS	.96	.97	17

Note. This table reports internal consistency for the UWES used in this study. A Cronbach's alpha above .90 indicates excellent reliability.

H_1: There is a negative correlation between perceived toxic leadership behaviors and overall group work engagement

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In examining the Hypothesis 1, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted and revealed a moderate positive correlation between TLS and UWES scores, $r(3) = .50$, $p = .391$, which did not reach significance (see Table 3). This preliminary trend, however, highlights the need for further investigation with a larger sample ($r = .500$) between total scores on the TLS and UWES, though this result did not reach statistical significance due to the extremely limited sample size. Interestingly, while this directionality might seem counterintuitive, it is likely a result of the variation in perceived toxic behaviors and engagement levels among such a small and possibly polarized group. More data are necessary to understand the true relationship, but the correlation itself reinforces the need for further investigation. There is a moderate positive correlation between Total_TLS and Total_UWES, though it is not statistically significant due to the small sample size.

Table 3**:** Pearson Correlation Between TLS and UWES Scores

Measure	1	2
Total TLS	—	.50
Total UWES	.50	—

Note. $N = 5$, $r(3) = .50$, $p = .391$ (two-tailed).

H_2: Groups led by individuals who exhibit high levels of toxic leadership report lower levels of performance than groups that do not report exposure to such leadership

Although this study hypothesized that groups exposed to high levels of toxic leadership would report lower levels of performance, the data did not support this assumption. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, the results revealed a moderate positive correlation between perceived toxic leadership behaviors and group work engagement, $r(3) = .50$, $p = .391$. This outcome was unexpected, as prior literature has consistently shown a negative association between toxic leadership and team effectiveness (Edwards, 2019; Einarsen et al., 2007). Given the small sample size and limited organizational context, these results may be influenced by additional variables such as team dynamics, leader familiarity, or coping strategies among the group. Moreover, several individual TLS items displayed significant standardized beta weights in regression models.

For instance, TLS_Q2 (abusive communication), TLS_Q3 (lack of empathy), and TLS_Q4 (erratic decision making) all significantly predicted variance in UWES scores. This aligns with Hypothesis 2 and earlier literature emphasizing that toxic leadership erodes psychological safety and team cohesion. While the correlation was not statistically significant, the trend underscores the importance of further investigation with a larger

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and more diverse sample to assess the impact of toxic leadership on group performance more accurately.

The observed moderate positive correlation was unexpected and contradicts the existing literature, which usually associates toxic leadership with reduced engagement. Due to the very small sample size, this finding is probably due to sampling error or individual differences among participants. Therefore, these results should be viewed with caution and not as proof that toxic leadership encourages engagement. Instead, this outcome emphasizes the need to replicate the study with a larger, more diverse sample to better understand the true nature of this relationship.

H_3: The five dimensions of toxic leadership each negatively influence at least one of the three dimensions of engagement

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the five dimensions of toxic leadership, as defined by Schmidt's (2008) scale—abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, self-promotion, and authoritarian leadership—would each have a negative impact on at least one of the three components of engagement as measured by the UWES (vigor, dedication, and absorption). Regression analysis provided a clear view of how specific toxic leadership traits influence engagement (see Table 4). When broken down by subscale, several items stood out as strong predictors of reduced engagement. Traits related to unpredictability (TLS_Q6), abusive supervision (TLS_Q2, TLS_Q5), and authoritarian leadership (TLS_Q21) consistently showed negative relationships with work engagement. These results support the idea that specific toxic traits, when present in leadership, can directly affect how committed and energized employees feel in their roles.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Work Engagement (UWES) from TLS Items

Predictor	B	*SE* B	β	*t*	*p*
Abusive supervision					
(Constant)	-191.25	—	—	—	—
TLS_Q2	17.17	—	1.45	—	.000
TLS_Q3	3.00	—	0.32	—	.000
TLS_Q4	13.58	—	0.76	—	.000
TLS_Q5	30.42	—	1.94	—	.000
Authoritarian leadership					
(Constant)	264.50	—	—	—	—

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Predictor	B	*SE* B	β	*t*	*p*
TLS_Q6	-48.00	—	-1.05	—	.000
TLS_Q9	7.50	—	0.20	—	.000
TLS_Q10	2.00	—	0.18	—	.000
TLS_Q12	1.50	—	0.15	—	.000
Narcissism					
(Constant)	186.25	—	—	—	—
TLS_Q13	12.30	—	1.25	—	.000
TLS_Q16	-18.50	—	-1.74	—	.000
TLS_Q17	11.75	—	1.26	—	.000
TLS_Q19	-27.80	—	-0.74	—	.000
Self-promotion					
(Constant)	28.12	—	—	—	—
TLS_Q21	-27.88	—	-2.95	—	.000
TLS_Q22	-6.72	—	-0.64	—	.000
TLS_Q23	3.00	—	0.30	—	.000
TLS_Q24	28.48	—	3.02	—	.000
Unpredictability					
(Constant)	43.20	—	—	—	—
TLS_Q26	45.50	—	4.87	—	.000
TLS_Q27	-40.77	—	-4.13	—	.000
TLS_Q29	-3.23	—	-0.16	—	.000
TLS_Q30	-3.53	—	-0.37	—	.000

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* B = standard error of B; β = standardized beta coefficient. All predictors are from Schmidt's (2008) TLS. Dependent variable: Total UWES Score. All *p* values are from SPSS output and are reported as .000 due to rounding; actual significance levels should be interpreted cautiously due to small sample size ($N = 5$).

Abusive supervision was found to be a consistent negative predictor of engagement, alongside unpredictability and authoritarianism. Behaviors such as abusive communication and belittling were associated with previous studies that connect abusive supervision to reduced psychological safety and decreased team performance.

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This result highlights the specific impact of abusive supervision within the broader concept of toxic leadership.

Interestingly, not all toxic behaviors produced negative outcomes. Certain items, especially within the self-promotion and narcissism subscales, revealed unexpected positive correlations with engagement. For example, TLS_Q26 showed a strong positive influence, which may suggest that in some cases, self-promoting behavior is interpreted by team members as confidence or initiative. That said, these results should be approached with caution, as the sample size was small and may not reflect broader trends across teams or organizations. In addition, several individual TLS items, such as TLS_Q3 (lack of empathy) and TLS_Q4 (erratic decision making), also demonstrated meaningful influence on engagement levels, reinforcing that even one or two toxic behaviors can disrupt group dynamics.

Although limited by the small sample, these results confirm that the selected instruments (TLS and UWES) are appropriate for measuring the relationship between toxic leadership and engagement. Early patterns observed here align with existing research and further emphasize the potential negative impact toxic leadership can have on team effectiveness. With a larger, more diverse sample, future studies can build on this foundation and explore these relationships in greater depth.

These findings offer preliminary insight into the research question that guided this study: What is the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance? While the data are limited, the patterns observed suggest that toxic leadership behaviors, particularly unpredictability, abusive supervision, and authoritarianism, can significantly influence how teams engage with their work. The regression models highlight that certain toxic traits have a stronger correlation with reduced engagement, which serves as a proxy for group performance. Although some unexpected results emerged, the collective data support the idea that toxic leadership does not operate in a vacuum; it directly affects the team's ability to function, collaborate, and remain motivated. These early insights reinforce the importance of continued investigation into how specific leadership behaviors shape organizational culture and team outcomes.

Conclusion

This pilot study set out to explore the impact of toxic leadership on group behavior and performance, with a focus on how specific toxic traits affect work engagement. Using the TLS (Schmidt, 2008) and the UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), early findings suggest that distinct toxic behaviors, particularly unpredictability, abusive supervision, and authoritarianism, have a measurable influence on team engagement. While some subscales showed the expected negative impact, others produced unexpected results, highlighting the complexity of interpreting toxic behaviors in small group dynamics.

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Although the sample size was limited, the instruments used proved to be reliable and effective for capturing key data points, validating their use in future research. The results reinforce the need to continue examining the ways toxic leadership can erode psychological safety, group cohesion, and overall performance. An important contribution of this pilot study is the confirmation that both the TLS and the UWES demonstrate excellent reliability, even when applied to a small sample size. This suggests that these instruments can be effectively utilized in exploratory studies to capture meaningful insights into toxic leadership and engagement, laying the groundwork for larger-scale investigations.

This study provides a foundation for a larger-scale investigation and raises important questions for both researchers and practitioners. Future research should expand the participant pool, include diverse organizational contexts, and consider longitudinal data to better understand the long-term effects of toxic leadership. In turn, organizations should evaluate how their leadership development and accountability structures may either prevent or enable these damaging behaviors. Recognizing and addressing toxic leadership is not only critical to protecting organizational culture but also essential for sustaining healthy, high-performing teams.

Implications and Future Research

The findings suggest that toxic leadership not only affects individual morale but also directly impacts group engagement and, by extension, performance. Future studies should consider expanding the sample size across multiple teams and organizational contexts to improve external validity. A longitudinal design could also help to establish causality. Additionally, qualitative interviews may offer richer insight into the lived experiences of those under toxic leadership and further validate the quantitative findings. These findings are preliminary and exploratory. The pilot study was designed to generate hypotheses rather than draw final conclusions. Further research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal data are needed to confirm and build on these initial observations.

Ultimately, this pilot reinforces the importance of identifying and mitigating toxic leadership behaviors before they undermine organizational culture and team productivity. Tools like the TLS and UWES offer valuable frameworks for that evaluation. For human resources professionals, the results indicate the relevance of identifying leadership traits such as unpredictability, authoritarianism, and abusive supervision at an early stage. Including leadership assessments, specific training, and accountability processes in organizational development strategies may address these behaviors before they affect team cohesion, employee morale, and overall performance.

About the Author

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Curtis Mullin is a Graduate Instructional Assistant and Ph.D. candidate in Organizational Leadership at Regent University's School of Business and Leadership, where his research examines leadership behaviors, organizational culture, and the effects of toxic leadership on group performance. He earned his MBA from Washington State University and a B.S. from Montana State University.

With more than 15 years of global experience in business consulting, sales leadership, and operational strategy, Curtis has worked with organizations across industries such as aerospace, defense, automotive, medical, and advanced manufacturing. His career includes leading multimillion-dollar sales initiatives, developing high-performing teams, and driving organizational transformation through innovative strategy and disciplined execution.

In addition to his academic work, Curtis is the founder of CM Business Dynamics, a consulting firm that helps organizations optimize performance, strengthen leadership capacity, and accelerate business growth. He combines practical industry expertise with research-based insights to deliver measurable impact for his clients.

A U.S. military veteran and entrepreneur, Curtis is passionate about preparing the next generation of leaders through both teaching and mentorship. Grounded in his Christian faith, he believes leadership should be exercised with integrity, humility, and purpose. Outside of work, he enjoys quality time with his family.

The email utilized for this study was cdmullin@proton.me. Curtis can be reached at Curtis.Mullin@CM-BD.com.

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Appendix A

Schmidt (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale (Formatted)

To begin, think of your **current supervisor** and answer each question with regard to this individual. Using the scale below, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Slightly Disagree**	**Slightly Agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**

My **current supervisor…**

1. ___Thinks that he/she is more capable than others
2. ___Ridicules subordinates
3. ___Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person
4. ___Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead
5. ___Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit
6. ___Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own
7. ___Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures
8. ___Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace
9. ___Allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume
10. ___Invades the privacy of subordinates
11. ___Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions
12. ___Publicly belittles subordinates
13. ___Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special

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circumstances

14. ___Varies in his/her degree of approachability
15. ___Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present
16. ___Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace
17. ___Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organization
18. ___Controls how subordinates complete their tasks
19. ___Has a sense of personal entitlement
20. ___Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned
21. ___Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her
22. ___Thrives on compliments and personal accolades
23. ___Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work
24. ___Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not
25. ___Causes subordinates to try to "read" his/her mood
26. ___Tells subordinates they are incompetent
27. ___Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons
28. ___Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways
29. ___Has explosive outbursts
30. ___Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion

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Factor loadings for items on the Schmidt (2008) Toxic Leadership Scale:

Items	Factor 1 S-P.	2 Ab. Sup.	3 U.	4 Narc.	5 Au. Lead.
Drastically changes his/her demeanor when his/her supervisor is present	.68	-.65	.57	-.49	.59
Denies responsibility for mistakes made in his/her unit	.69	-.66	.61	-.57	.65
Will only offer assistance to people who can help him/her get ahead	.74	-.67	.59	-.54	.58
Accepts credit for successes that do not belong to him/her	.77	-.66	.64	-.59	.57
Acts only in the best interest of his/her next promotion	.74	-.66	.61	-.66	.66
Ridicules subordinates	.57	-.84	.76	-.44	.70
Holds subordinates responsible for things outside their job descriptions	.50	-.68	.61	-.53	.57
Is not considerate about subordinates' commitments outside of work	.55	-.72	.58	-.49	.56
Speaks poorly about subordinates to other people in the workplace	.59	-.80	.61	-.59	.63
Publicly belittles subordinates	.45	-.96	.73	-.46	.56
Reminds subordinates of their past mistakes and failures	.57	-.81	.65	-.40	.62
Tells subordinates they are incompetent	.47	-.77	.63	-.51	.61
Has explosive outbursts	.30	-.66	.83	-.49	.57
Allows his/her current mood to define the climate of the workplace	.55	-.68	.86	-.55	.54
Expresses anger at subordinates for unknown reasons	.54	-.72	.79	-.41	.69
Allows his/her mood to affect his/her vocal tone and volume	.36	-.62	.86	-.55	.52
Varies in his/her degree of approachability	.36	-.54	.63	-.37	.44
Causes subordinates to try to "read" his/her mood	.46	-.61	.74	-.43	.62

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Affects the emotions of subordinates when impassioned	.25	-.56	.69	-.46	.52
Has a sense of personal entitlement	.42	-.50	.51	-.64	.60
Assumes that he/she is destined to enter the highest ranks of my organization	.38	-.52	.54	-.72	.52
Thinks that he/she is more capable than others	.40	-.62	.69	-.80	.70
Believes that he/she is an extraordinary person	.37	-.45	.48	-.83	.49
Thrives on compliments and personal accolades	.41	-.46	.50	-.75	.47
Controls how subordinates complete their tasks	.36	-.50	.52	-.46	.75
Invades the privacy of subordinates	.58	-.64	.54	-.46	.66
Does not permit subordinates to approach goals in new ways	.50	-.60	.56	-.53	.79
Will ignore ideas that are contrary to his/her own	.56	-.65	.63	-.61	.75
Is inflexible when it comes to organizational policies, even in special circumstances	.50	-.60	.54	-.40	.72
Determines all decisions in the unit whether they are important or not	.32	-.54	.55	-.56	.75

Appendix B

Work & Well-Being Survey (UWES) © (English Version)

The following 17 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the '0' (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you feel it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.

	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	A few times a	Once a month or	A few times a	Once a week	A few times a	Every day

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1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy* (*VI1)*
2. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose *(DE1)*
3. Time flies when I'm working *(AB1)*
4. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous *(VI2)**
5. I am enthusiastic about my job (*DE2)**
6. __When I am working, I forget everything else around me *(AB2)*
7. __My job inspires me *(DE3)**
8. __When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work *(VI3)**
9. __I feel happy when I am working intensely *(AB3*)*
10. __I am proud on the work that I do *(DE4)**
11. __I am immersed in my work *(AB4)**
12. __I can continue working for very long periods at a time *(VI4)*
13. __To me, my job is challenging *(DE5)*
14. __I get carried away when I'm working *(AB5)**
15. __At my job, I am very resilient, mentally *(VI5)*
16. __It is difficult to detach myself from my job *(AB6)*
17. __At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well *(VI6)*

* Shortened version (UWES-9); VI= vigor; DE = dedication; AB = absorption

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Organizational Learning as Healing: Cultivating Safety and Growth After Trauma

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

Trauma impacts every sector of the modern workforce, shaping how individuals engage, learn, and contribute within organizations. Traditional models of organizational learning emphasize knowledge transfer but often neglect healing, safety, and restoration. This paper argues that trauma-informed leadership (TIL), when integrated with human resource development (HRD) theory and a Christ-centered worldview, can transform organizational learning into a pathway for human flourishing. Drawing on Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, the study highlights three leadership behaviors—regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—and applies them within HRD contexts. Five dimensions of organizational safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—are presented as prerequisites for effective learning. Case illustrations from nonprofit and military contexts demonstrate practical applications. The paper concludes with recommendations for HRD professionals, including reflective storytelling, pacing learning for deeper processing, and cultivating safe learning environments that affirm dignity and purpose.

Keywords: trauma, learning, healing, leadership, organization

Trauma—whether personal or collective, acute or cumulative—significantly influences how individuals think, learn, relate to others, and perform at work. As organizations face crises like pandemics, leadership failures, economic downturns, and community trauma, more employees bear emotional and mental burdens that directly impact their ability to learn. Conventional organizational learning models focus on efficiency and knowledge sharing but often overlook aspects like safety, agency, and relational support. When these basic needs are unmet, organizations unintentionally deepen distress and contribute to burnout and disengagement (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

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This paper contends that organizational learning must become a trauma-informed, relationally grounded process that fosters both skill development and human healing. Trauma-informed leadership (TIL), defined as a leader's ability to prioritize follower well-being, resilience, and dignity (Lloyd, 2024), provides a model for establishing such environments. Lloyd's TIL framework combines four leadership attributes with four core leadership behaviors. The paper emphasizes the three behaviors most directly related to learning and human resource development (HRD): regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing.

Adult learning theory reinforces these principles by emphasizing relevance, respect, and emotional readiness (Knowles et al., 2015). Trauma-informed learning builds on these foundations by supporting reflection, autonomy, and relational connection. This paper combines TIL, HRD theory, and a Christ-centered worldview to demonstrate how organizational learning can promote safety, restoration, and flourishing. Case studies and practical recommendations illustrate how trauma-informed practices enhance learning, trust, and long-term growth.

Trauma-Informed Leadership and the Learning Environment

TIL acknowledges the emotional, cognitive, relational, cultural, and spiritual realities that employees bring to the workplace. Instead of viewing learning and performance only through behavioral or cognitive perspectives, TIL focuses on the whole person and how trauma influences perception, stress responses, and engagement. Leaders significantly impact the psychological climate of learning environments; thus, their stance, presence, and practices determine whether individuals feel safe or threatened.

The TIL framework links leadership theory, neuroscience, and trauma research to develop leadership behaviors that promote healing-centered workplaces (Lloyd, 2024). Among its components, three behaviors form the foundation for trauma-informed learning: (a) regulating distress, (b) empowering others, and (c) practicing emotional healing. These behaviors influence every part of the HRD process. They create psychologically and relationally supportive learning environments where trauma-affected learners can fully engage, reflect, and grow.

Regulating Distress: The Foundation of Trauma-Informed Learning

Regulating distress is the essential behavior in TIL because it addresses the fundamental need for learning: human beings must feel completely safe—physically, emotionally, relationally, morally, and culturally. Without safety, the brain's ability to reflect, reason, and remember is impaired. Neuroscience research has confirmed that trauma activates the amygdala, which then narrows attention, disrupts working memory, and prioritizes physiological survival over processing new information (Substance Abuse and Mental

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Health Services Administration; 2014). In simple terms, when people feel unsafe, learning stops.

Within Lloyd's (2024) framework of TIL, managing distress is more than just responding to crises; it involves intentionally creating environments where individuals can stay grounded, connected, and emotionally secure. Leaders are encouraged to proactively identify potential triggers, minimize uncertainty, establish predictable routines, and demonstrate calm behavior. Taking the time to do this helps learners transition from survival mode to engagement mode.

Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework outlines five safety dimensions—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—that together form an ecosystem of security where learning can thrive. While each dimension is vital, sustainable organizational learning relies on all five being purposefully cultivated. If even one dimension is compromised, learners may feel threatened, withdraw, or revert to self-protective behaviors that impede growth.

Physical Safety: Creating Environments That Support Presence and Attention

Physical safety is the most tangible aspect and often the easiest to overlook because it involves basic environmental conditions; however, these conditions have significant cognitive and emotional impacts. Factors such as lighting, room temperature, seating arrangements, noise levels, accessibility, and spacing affect how comfortable learners feel and how present they feel. Research in adult education has shown that physical comfort improves attention, participation, and memory (Brookfield, 2013). On the other hand, environments that are chaotic, cramped, overstimulating, or poorly equipped can increase anxiety and hinder learning readiness.

For trauma-affected individuals, environmental cues are crucial. A slamming door, blocked exit, bright lighting, or sudden noise can trigger startled reactions or dissociation. Trauma-informed leaders, therefore, intentionally create learning spaces: clear sight lines, tidy rooms, opportunities for movement, and consistent physical layouts. Even small changes, dimmed lights, soft seating, and access to water show that the space is designed with human needs in mind.

In HRD contexts, physical safety also involves making sure training spaces are accessible to all participants, including those with disabilities or sensory sensitivities. It means removing unnecessary barriers and respecting each participant's needs for comfort, mobility, and environmental consistency.

Psychological Safety: Encouraging Openness, Questions, and Vulnerability.

Psychological safety is the belief that individuals can express thoughts, ask questions, admit mistakes, and share reflections without fear of judgment or retaliation. It is

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widely recognized in leadership and team science as a core predictor of engagement, creativity, and risk taking (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). For trauma-impacted learners, psychological safety is especially vital because shame, fear of failure, and fear of misinterpretation are often heightened.

Trauma-informed leaders foster psychological safety by focusing on learning rather than performance, encouraging questions without assigning value judgments, clarifying expectations to minimize ambiguity, showing appreciation for vulnerability, avoiding public criticism or shaming, and demonstrating self-compassion and humility.

In a trauma-informed learning setting, failure is viewed as part of the learning journey rather than as proof of inadequacy. This perspective eases the pressure that trauma-affected individuals often feel and enables them to try, explore, and grow without the fear of emotional harm.

Psychological safety in learning environments encourages meaning making and reflection. When learners feel they can participate authentically, their cognitive and emotional processing becomes more profound and personal.

Social Safety: Belonging, Connection, and the Power of Community

Social safety involves people feeling a sense of belonging, acceptance, inclusion, and connection within a group. Trauma can cause people to withdraw from relationships, develop mistrust, or become overly alert in social situations. Social safety promotes this by building group unity, shared identity, cooperation, and mutual respect.

In trauma-informed learning environments, social safety is created by encouraging small-group discussions, using inclusive language, designing activities that foster collaboration, establishing guidelines for respectful engagement, and celebrating differences rather than just tolerating them.

Leaders play a vital role in demonstrating relational warmth and consistency. When leaders show empathy, active listening, and approachability, learners feel more socially connected. Over time, social bonds form, enhancing the group's ability to engage in shared learning and build resilience.

Social safety also promotes accountability in learning communities. When learners care about each other and feel safe together, they take relational risks that increase their engagement, such as providing feedback, sharing personal insights, or engaging in reflective dialogue.

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Moral Safety: Integrity, Fairness, and Ethical Consistency

Moral safety refers to an environment where individuals experience fairness, justice, and ethical integrity. Moral injury can occur when organizations violate personal values, break trust, or engage in inconsistent or harmful practices. When moral safety is compromised, learners experience dissonance that undermines trust and blocks engagement.

Trauma-informed leaders build moral safety by demonstrating ethical consistency, being transparent about decisions, addressing inequities instead of ignoring them, holding everyone—including leaders—to the same moral standards, and acknowledging harm while working to repair it.

In HRD settings, moral safety means that learning experiences are not manipulated, coerced, or designed to serve hidden agendas. It ensures that leaders do not use learning environments to shame, pressure, or punish employees. Instead, integrity guides the framework of the learning experience.

Moral safety helps learners relax into trust, knowing the environment aligns with both organizational and personal values.

Cultural Safety: Honoring Identity, Equity, and Diverse Narratives

Cultural safety tackles power dynamics, diversity, identity, and representation. Trauma and culture often intersect: individuals from marginalized groups may face compounded trauma from discrimination, microaggressions, cultural invisibility, or systemic inequalities. Cultural safety in learning environments requires acknowledging cultural identities, avoiding harmful stereotypes, representing diverse experiences, using learning materials that reflect diverse experiences, and being sensitive to how trauma affects different communities.

Trauma-informed leaders work to challenge cultural invalidation. They create learning experiences that respect each person's background, avoid making cultural assumptions, and make room for diverse perspectives. A culturally safe environment communicates, "You belong. Your story matters. You are seen." This form of validation builds trust and deep engagement.

The Interdependence of the Five Dimensions

These five dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other. Physical safety supports psychological safety; psychological safety enables social connection; social safety fosters moral awareness; moral safety strengthens cultural safety. Together, they create a learning environment where individuals feel grounded enough to engage themselves fully.

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If any dimension is overlooked, trauma-affected learners may resort to self-protective behavior, which can hinder learning. Therefore, managing distress requires a comprehensive focus on all five dimensions, each acting as a pillar that supports the entire structure of trauma-informed education.

Empowering Others: Restoring Agency in the Learning Process

Empowering others is the second key TIL behavior related to organizational learning. It stems from a fundamental truth: trauma reduces agency, and learning helps restore it. Traumatic experiences, whether personal, organizational, relational, or systemic, often involve losing control, facing unpredictability, feeling powerless, or experiencing coercion. These conditions influence how individuals participate in environments that mirror these power imbalances, including workplaces and formal learning settings.

To address this, trauma-informed leaders intentionally create learning environments that foster a sense of ownership among participants. This process is not just a superficial tactic; it directly counteracts the psychological and emotional effects of trauma. When individuals are allowed to choose how they engage, share their perspectives, or influence their learning experience, it activates parts of the brain linked to autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation, key abilities that trauma often suppresses.

At its core, empowering others involves shifting the learning approach from teaching at learners to learning with them. It is a democratizing move that shares power, values contributions, and recognizes learners as active agents in their own development.

The Connection Between Agency and Healing

Trauma often leads to patterns like learned helplessness, hypercompliance, withdrawal, or fear-based decision making. When people have experienced environments where their choices were ignored or punished, or where their voices were silenced, they may approach learning with caution or skepticism. Even highly skilled professionals can resort to self-protective behaviors when they associate authority with danger or humiliation.

Restoring agency is essential for both learning and healing. Trauma-informed learning environments are based on the idea that every learner has something valuable to offer, has the right to independence, and should have opportunities to influence their learning journey. Learning is most effective when built on collaboration rather than compliance. When individuals experience genuine agency, they feel psychological safety, competence, and empowerment—three elements closely linked to resilience.

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Alignment With Adult Learning Theory.

Knowles et al. (2015) described adult learners as self-directed, experience-rich individuals who thrive when given autonomy and control. Merriam and Bierema (2014) similarly emphasized that adults learn best when learning is relevant to their personal goals, connected to their lived experiences, respectful of their autonomy, and participatory rather than passive. These principles closely align with the trauma-informed need to restore agency. When learners have the freedom to choose how they participate, explore content through their lived experiences, or cocreate learning outcomes, they engage in more profound meaning making and achieve long-term retention.

Adult learners do not want to be talked at; they want to be engaged, respected, and invited into dialogue. Trauma-informed learning honors this by treating learners as full participants capable of contributing to their growth rather than passive recipients.

Practical Strategies for Empowering Others

Trauma-informed leaders promote empowerment through intentional instructional and leadership approaches. The following practices show how empowering others can be incorporated into HRD settings.

- **offering multiple modes of engagement**: Not all learners feel comfortable participating in the same way, especially those carrying trauma. Options may include verbal discussion, silent reflection, small-group conversation, written responses, and pair-share activities. By providing alternatives, leaders ensure that all learners can contribute without pressure.
- **providing options for learning activities**: Choice can be embedded in the content and format of learning tasks. Learners might select which case study to analyze, which project to pursue, whether to write, present, or create something visual, and how to demonstrate competency. This autonomy increases engagement and personal investment.
- **inviting story and lived experience**: Allowing learners to connect content to personal experience affirms their identity and expertise. Trauma-informed leaders recognize lived experience as a valid form of knowledge, not just an aside.
- **encouraging reflection and meaning making**: Open-ended questions enable learners to connect content with personal insights. Reflection is especially healing for individuals affected by trauma because it reengages cognitive processes and aids emotional integration.
- **allowing participation on one's own terms**: Trauma-affected learners may require flexibility in participation. Allowing learners to "pass," take breaks, or work at a comfortable pace helps prevent retraumatization.

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- **choosing between collaborative and individual learning**: Some learners feel safer in small groups, while others prefer individual tasks. Providing both options respects personal boundaries and helps lessen social anxiety.
- **cocreating agreements for the learning space**. Instead of imposing rules, leaders should involve learners in creating group norms. This process of inclusion encourages ownership, fairness, and shared commitment.

When leaders apply these strategies, they send a message to learners: "Your voice matters. Your choices matter. You matter." This fundamental respect fosters open learning environments where individuals feel empowered and valued.

Agency as Spiritual Formation.

From a Christ-centered perspective, empowering agency aligns with the biblical theme of human dignity. Jesus consistently empowered individuals, inviting them to respond, choose, follow, question, and participate actively in their transformation. He healed people by restoring both their bodies and their agency: "What do you want me to do for you?" (*New International Version*, 2024, Mark 10:51; Matt. 20:32) was not a rhetorical question but an affirmation of dignity.

TIL reflects this outlook. It affirms that each learner is an image-bearer of God with a story, voice, and purpose. Allowing learners to make choices honors their humanity; inviting their perspectives recognizes their worth.

In this sense, empowering others is not only psychologically beneficial but also spiritually restorative. It contributes to the redemptive process of recovering what trauma tries to take away.

The Impact of Agency on Organizational Outcomes.

When learners experience agency, several outcomes emerge. Increased motivation occurs when people engage more deeply, feeling a sense of ownership. Greater retention and application happen because autonomy enhances relevance and meaningful impact. Improved trust and empowerment signal respect and relational safety. Strengthened team cohesion is built through shared agency, fostering collaborative cultures. Reduction in trauma reactions happens as choice lowers threat perception and increases regulation. Higher levels of creativity and problem solving occur because agency fuels innovation. Organizations that empower learners see long-term benefits in culture, morale, and performance. HRD becomes not merely functional but transformational.

Empowering others restores what trauma diminishes: autonomy, self-worth, and participation. It aligns with adult learning theory, enhances HRD effectiveness, and reflects a Christ-centered ethic of honoring human dignity. When leaders incorporate

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agency into learning experiences, they create a path for both learning and healing—supporting the whole person and promoting organizational flourishing.

Practicing Emotional Healing: The Relational Core of Trauma-Informed Learning

Practicing emotional healing is the third key TIL leadership behavior that fosters meaningful organizational learning. While regulating distress helps create safety, empowering others restores agency, and practicing emotional healing focuses on the relational, emotional, and spiritual sides of learning. It acknowledges that trauma is mainly relational—it causes wounds through disconnection, betrayal, violation, abandonment, or unmet human needs. Therefore, healing must also happen through relationships, presence, empathy, and trust building. Trauma-informed learning environments intentionally foster the relational conditions needed for emotional repair, identity integration, and transformative growth.

Unlike traditional workplace learning models that see emotions as distractions or obstacles, trauma-informed approaches recognize emotions as vital data and essential to meaning making. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) highlighted that transformative learning depends on the learner's ability to critically reflect on assumptions, reinterpret experiences, and adopt new perspectives, processes that cannot happen without emotional engagement and relational support. Emotional healing is not secondary to learning; it creates the environment in which genuine learning can occur.

The Role of Relationship in Healing-Centered Learning Environments

Trauma affects a person's ability to trust, connect, and depend on others. Consequently, learning environments that overlook relational dynamics risk retraumatizing participants by repeating past experiences of isolation, shame, or powerlessness. Trauma-informed leaders counter this by providing consistent relational cues of safety: warmth, predictability, empathy, appropriate transparency, and regulated emotional presence.

In trauma-affected learners, relational cues from leaders are often interpreted with heightened sensitivity. A harsh tone can trigger fear. A dismissive response may induce shame or withdrawal. A lack of attunement can signal danger. By demonstrating emotional stability, leaders create an environment where learners feel secure enough to explore, reflect, and grow.

Practicing emotional healing requires leaders to adopt relational behaviors such as attentive listening, listening to understand rather than to correct, empathic responses that validate emotional experiences without minimizing them, nonjudgmental curiosity that invites deeper reflection with compassion, consistency, and follow-through that

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build trust through reliable behavior, and calm emotional presence that models regulation in the face of tension or discomfort.

Leaders do not need to act as counselors; instead, they show a caring attitude that supports learner well-being. They create relationships where vulnerability is safe and accepted and where emotional expression is welcomed rather than punished.

Emotional Healing as a Cognitive Enabler.

Trauma-informed leaders understand that emotional healing is more than a soft skill; it is a vital cognitive need. Emotional distress hampers working memory, executive functions, creativity, and problem solving—all essential for workplace learning. When learners carry unrecognized emotional burdens into learning environments, they may struggle to focus, participate, or retain information.

Healing-centered approaches remove emotional barriers to learning by allowing learners to acknowledge feelings before shifting into instruction, providing opportunities for reflection, journaling, or discussion, offering breaks when learners feel overwhelmed, using grounding exercises or mindfulness techniques, and creating space for emotional processing without stigma. Once emotional distress is acknowledged and supported, cognitive resources become accessible again. Learners can think more clearly, engage more deeply, and process new information more effectively.

The Spiritual Dimension of Emotional Healing

Within a Christ-centered worldview, emotional healing is closely linked to spiritual growth. Scripture presents Jesus as a healer whose leadership was characterized not by control but by presence, compassion, and renewal. His invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 focuses on offering rest to the weary and burdened, showing that learning and transformation happen through a relational connection with Him.

Jesus modeled trauma-informed pedagogy long before the term existed:

- He saw people before He taught them.
- He addressed emotional wounds before offering instruction.
- He restored dignity before extending a challenge.
- He created safety through gentleness and compassion.
- He prioritized relationships over performance.
- He paced instruction according to readiness, not urgency.

In every encounter, Jesus ministered to the whole person, body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Trauma-informed leaders adopt this model in both secular and faith-based settings, creating learning environments where people feel valued, seen, and known. In

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this way, emotional healing becomes an expression of the imago Dei—honoring the divine worth within each individual.

Emotional Healing as a Trauma-Informed Leadership Posture

Emotional healing is not an event but a posture—a consistent way of being in relationship with learners. It shapes how leaders respond to distress, navigate conflict, and interpret behavior. Instead of taking emotional reactions personally or viewing them as barriers, trauma-informed leaders interpret them as signals of unmet needs or past experiences that require compassion and support.

This posture emphasizes grace over judgment, assuming people are doing their best; patience over urgency, understanding that healing takes time; curiosity over control, inquiring about what drives behavior rather than trying to fix it; support over demand, scaffolding learning instead of forcing participation; and presence over performance, focusing on who the learner is, not just what they produce. In HRD, this posture transforms learning environments from transactional spaces to relational sanctuaries where individuals feel safe enough to take risks, grow, and access their full potential.

Operationalizing Emotional Healing in HRD Practice

Emotional healing becomes visible in organizational learning through specific practices that communicate care and relational safety.

- **circle-based dialogue and story sharing**: Story circles allow learners to share experiences, connect emotionally, and develop empathy. Listening to one another's stories reduces isolation and fosters collective meaning-making.
- **relational check-ins**: Beginning sessions with simple questions such as "How is your heart today?" or "What do you need to feel present?" encourages openness and mental readiness.
- **trauma-informed facilitation techniques**: Leaders use warm tone, flexible pacing, invitational rather than directive language, and transparent expectations.
- **emotional regulation supports**: Practices such as grounding techniques, breathing exercises, or reflective pauses help learners regulate their nervous systems.
- **normalizing emotional expression**: Statements like "It is okay to feel overwhelmed here" reduce shame and encourage authentic participation.
- **creating connection before content**: Leaders build relational rapport before moving into instruction, ensuring learners feel emotionally steady.
- **offering repair after rupture**. If conflict arises, leaders model reconciliation, demonstrating that relationships can be restored.

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These practices do not require clinical expertise; they require relational intentionality. When implemented consistently, they form a healing-centered learning culture.

The Transformative Outcomes of Emotional Healing

When emotional healing is incorporated into organizational learning, several transformational outcomes occur, such as increased trust between leaders and learners, greater openness to new ideas and feedback, stronger team cohesion, improved emotional intelligence, higher resilience during organizational change, reduced conflict and miscommunication, enhanced capacity for transformational learning, and a renewed sense of identity and self-worth. Perhaps most importantly, emotional healing rebuilds the relational connections that trauma weakens. It helps individuals see themselves not as broken or inadequate but as capable, valued contributors.

Practicing emotional healing is the heart of trauma-informed organizational learning. It recognizes that learning is not merely cognitive but deeply relational and emotional. Through empathy, attunement, and presence, leaders create environments where learners feel safe, valued, and supported. In these environments, learning becomes not only possible but transformative—restoring dignity, strengthening identity, and inviting individuals into deeper flourishing.

Adult Learning Theory and Biblical Integration

Adult learning theory offers a crucial foundation for understanding how trauma-informed organizational learning fosters healing and growth. Adults come into learning settings with accumulated experiences, beliefs, and emotional patterns that influence how they interpret, remember, and use information. According to Knowles et al. (2015), adults learn most effectively when the content is relevant to their lives, when they are treated with respect, and when they feel equipped and confident to participate in the learning process. These principles naturally align with TIL practices, which focus on emotional safety, personal agency, and supportive relationships.

For individuals impacted by trauma, learning is deeply tied to identity, trust, and readiness. Trauma-informed environments enhance adult learning principles by lowering emotional threats, providing time for processing, and respecting the learner's lived story. Reflection and narrative meaning making help reassemble fragmented experiences, while self-direction restores autonomy often diminished by trauma. Together, these conditions foster a learning climate where adults can access curiosity, creativity, and confidence.

A Christ-centered worldview enriches these insights. Jesus taught in ways that exemplify the principles described by Knowles et al. (2015)—relational, invitational, and rooted in respect for human dignity. His pedagogy was trauma informed because it

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focused on healing and restoration. He taught in ways that honored agency (Mark 10:51), valued experience (John 4:1-42), and restored dignity (John 8:1-11). His focus on rest, restoration, and relationship (Matthew 11:28–30) reflects both trauma-informed and adult learning principles.

Integrating adult learning theory with Christ's example frames organizational learning as a comprehensive process that fosters cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development. By creating environments grounded in relevance, respect, agency, and relational safety, HRD professionals establish spaces where trauma-impacted individuals can rebuild trust, reconnect with purpose, and undergo meaningful, transformative learning.

Case Illustrations

Faith-Based Nonprofit Navigating Leadership Crisis

A midsized faith-based nonprofit experienced a sudden leadership failure due to ethical misconduct by senior leaders. The aftermath was severe: employees felt betrayed, confused, and emotionally shaken. Trust rapidly eroded, and staff remained uncertain about the organization's direction, stability, or integrity. Before the crisis, the organization's learning environments were highly structured, compliance focused, and hierarchical; afterward, staff lacked the emotional readiness and psychological capacity to reengage with these traditional learning formats.

Recognizing Trauma in the Organizational System

During assessment, it became clear that trauma was not limited to individuals—the organization itself experienced collective trauma. Staff showed signs typical of trauma-affected environments: withdrawal from participation, emotional volatility or numbness, increased suspicion of leadership, disengagement during team meetings, higher absenteeism, and loss of motivation and purpose.

These indicators reflected both acute trauma (triggered by the leadership scandal) and chronic organizational trauma accumulated over years of authoritarian practices that left little room for voice or emotional expression.

Introducing Reflective Storytelling as a Healing Mechanism

Recognizing that traditional training modules would not address the relational ruptures, the new interim leadership team incorporated reflective storytelling into the development process. Storytelling was chosen because it supports sense making, identity formation, and emotional expression—key elements for trauma recovery (Brown et al., 2005; Denning, 2011). Additionally, stories foster empathy, break down isolation, and restore collective meaning, all of which are essential for healing.

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Story circles were added to weekly team meetings. These circles included a shared prompt such as "What has this season taught you about resilience?", an invitational tone rather than a mandatory format, opportunities to speak without interruption, and gentle facilitation that focused on emotional presence rather than problem solving. Participation was voluntary, in line with trauma-informed principles of agency and choice.

Outcomes: Rebuilding Identity, Trust, and Meaning

Over several months, the organization experienced notable changes: renewed cohesion, as employees began reestablishing relational bonds and rebuilding shared identity; improved communication, with staff feeling more comfortable expressing concerns and naming emotions; restored trust, as leadership transparency and consistency helped rebuild psychological safety; and enhanced engagement, with learning activities becoming more collaborative and energizing.

One employee described the storytelling process as "the first time I felt like my voice actually mattered in this organization." Another reflected, "Hearing others' stories helped me realize I was not alone."

Notably, turnover decreased significantly, and team members reported feeling more connected to the mission. The organization's learning culture, which was once characterized by compliance and silence, had transformed into one focused on relational depth, meaning making, and shared learning.

Implications for HRD

This case shows that healing must come before performance and that storytelling is an effective way to help individuals rejoin a community after trauma. Organizational learning shifted from just a way to build skills to a space for emotional healing and spiritual renewal.

Trauma-Informed Learning in a Military Training Environment

The second context involves a military training unit operating in a high-pressure environment characterized by rapid turnover, an intense operational tempo, and ongoing stress. Military learning environments are typically hierarchical, fast paced, and performance oriented, which can unintentionally overwhelm trainees and hinder effective learning, especially for soldiers with prior trauma or heightened stress responses.

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Identifying Trauma Responses Within Training Dynamics

Upon evaluation, the leadership team identified several recurring challenges: trainees shutting down during high-intensity briefings, difficulty retaining information under pressure, increased disciplinary issues related to emotional outbursts, low morale and a declining sense of cohesion, and inconsistent performance across training cycles.

Instead of blaming these issues only on lack of discipline or motivation, leadership started to see them as possible trauma responses—especially in soldiers with prior deployments, combat exposure, or personal trauma histories.

Implementing Trauma-Informed Training Adjustments.

Three key adjustments were made.

- ***Structured Debriefs Incorporating Emotional Awareness***. Instead of immediately critiquing performance, leaders created space for trainees to share their emotional responses: frustration, fear, confusion, or tension. These debriefs normalized emotional expression and reduced shame, improving readiness for cognitive processing.
- ***Peer Mentoring for Relational Support***. Pairs and small groups were created to offer mutual encouragement. Trainees were encouraged to support each other through challenges, review material together, and discuss strategies for managing emotions.
- ***Adjusted Pacing to Prevent Cognitive Overload***. Instructors deliberately slowed down instruction during high-stress modules by adding reflection pauses, shorter lectures, and more time for hands-on practice. This change in pacing was grounded in adult learning theory and trauma-informed research.

Outcomes: Increased Resilience, Performance, and Cohesion

Within 6 months of implementing trauma-informed practices, several measurable improvements appeared: better retention of essential information, increased confidence during assessments, fewer disciplinary incidents, higher morale and group cohesion, and greater adaptability and stress tolerance.

Feedback from trainees indicated that the environment felt "more human," "less overwhelming," and "more supportive." Many reported feeling more prepared to handle both emotional stress and technical learning tasks.

Implications for HRD

This case demonstrates that trauma-informed practices do not weaken discipline, excellence, or operational readiness—in fact, they enhance them. When learners feel

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safe, seen, and supported, their cognitive performance, resilience, and teamwork improve significantly. HRD systems in high-stress industries can greatly benefit from trauma-informed practices without compromising rigor or mission-essential outcomes.

Synthesis of Both Cases

Although the nonprofit and military environments differ in structure, purpose, and culture, both show the same lesson: learning thrives when spaces foster safety, agency, and relational bonds. Both organizations saw increased trust, greater engagement, less emotional and cognitive overload, stronger team dynamics, renewed purpose and identity, and better learning results.

These case studies validate trauma-informed organizational learning as a practical, evidence-based, and spiritually grounded approach capable of transforming diverse workplace settings.

Recommendations for HRD Professionals

HRD professionals play a vital role in shaping organizational learning environments. Since HRD often overlaps with leadership, learning, talent development, and organizational culture, it is uniquely positioned to influence the overall environment where people heal, grow, and succeed. Trauma-informed practices offer not only a more compassionate approach to learning but also a more effective one by improving retention, engagement, motivation, and the long-term transfer of knowledge.

To incorporate trauma-informed principles into HRD systems, professionals must shift from isolated interventions to a comprehensive framework that influences every part of the learning experience. The following recommendations offer practical, actionable strategies grounded in research, trauma-informed theory, adult learning principles, and Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework.

Integrate Reflective Storytelling as a Core Learning Practice

Embedding reflective storytelling in all development programs is essential because it deepens meaning making, boosts emotional processing, and facilitates relational healing. Storytelling helps learners connect content with their personal experiences, reframe traumatic events, and rebuild their identity after trauma. Using story circles, narrative prompts, and leader-modeled vulnerability, HRD professionals can shift learning from mere information transfer to a process of communal healing.

Pace Learning Intentionally to Support Cognitive and Emotional Readiness

Trauma-informed learning involves slowing down—not to lessen rigor but to create mental and emotional space for deeper understanding. Deliberate pacing minimizes

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overwhelm, boosts retention, and respects the emotional capacity of trauma-affected learners. Practical methods include shorter teaching segments, built-in reflection pauses, guided silence, and longer debriefs after challenging content. This method helps learners absorb knowledge while calming the nervous system.

Foster Multidimensional Safety in Every Learning Environment

The five dimensions of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—should serve as core design principles in HRD. When learners feel safe, trust grows, vulnerability becomes possible, and higher order thinking resumes. Safety practices include inclusive communication, clear expectations, group agreements, ethical consistency, confidentiality policies, and culturally responsive materials. These elements allow learners to participate fully and confidently.

Empower Learner Agency Through Voice and Choice

Empowering others restores autonomy and strengthens intrinsic motivation—both critical in trauma recovery and adult learning. HRD professionals should design programs that offer options for participation, decision making in learning pathways, collaborative goal setting, and opportunities for learners to shape discussions. When learners feel ownership, their engagement increases, and their sense of personal capability is restored. Agency becomes both a learning outcome and a healing mechanism.

Flourishing in Christ as an Outcome

Flourishing in Christ signifies the deepest result of trauma-informed organizational learning. While HRD usually gauges growth through performance and skills, TIL broadens the idea of development to include emotional healing, relational wholeness, and spiritual renewal. In this approach, thriving is not just about the absence of distress; it is about having safety, agency, connection, and purpose.

Trauma disrupts identity, confidence, and trust, often leaving individuals feeling fragmented or powerless. Trauma-informed learning environments address these effects by fostering safety, giving people their voices back, and encouraging relational support. Through the TIL framework, learners find conditions in which they can manage distress, actively engage in their growth, and reconnect with their sense of worth and ability. Over time, these experiences help rebuild parts of the self that trauma suppresses—creativity, curiosity, hope, and resilience.

Flourishing becomes apparent through several measurable outcomes. Learners develop healthier interpersonal skills, communicating with more empathy and collaborating with greater confidence. Workplace stress declines as paced instruction, reflective

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practices, and emotional regulation techniques help restore cognitive clarity. Team resilience strengthens, enabling groups to navigate challenges with stability and unity. Perhaps most importantly, organizational trust deepens. Consistent TIL behaviors—transparency, ethical integrity, and relational presence—repair the trust that trauma often erodes.

From a Christ-centered perspective, flourishing also includes spiritual restoration. Trauma can distort a person's understanding of God and self, yet trauma-informed practices reflect Christ's ministry of compassion, dignity, and invitation. When learners are treated with grace, respect, and gentleness, they experience the heart of Christ through the learning environment itself. This experience fosters a renewed identity, more profound hope, and greater purpose.

Ultimately, trauma-informed organizational learning redefines HRD as a healing practice—one that respects each person as an image-bearer of God and fosters environments where individuals can heal, grow, and thrive fully.

Conclusion

Organizational learning must shift from a content-focused model to a trauma-informed, Christ-centered approach that fosters healing, trust, and holistic growth. Trauma profoundly influences how individuals learn and interact, underscoring the importance of safety, agency, and relational support for effective HRD practice. Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, which includes regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing, guides leaders in creating environments where learners restore cognitive clarity, emotional stability, and relational confidence.

When combined with adult learning theory and the restorative posture of Christ's teaching, organizational learning becomes transformative rather than transactional. Case examples from nonprofit and military contexts show improvements in engagement, resilience, and trust when trauma-informed practices are incorporated.

Ultimately, trauma-informed learning redefines HRD as a redemptive process. By honoring individuals as image-bearers of God, leaders foster environments where people can heal, grow, and flourish.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, a U.S. Army veteran, and the founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and developed the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that combines neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work examines how trauma-informed practices improve

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leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Heart Formation: Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Leadership

Alina Wreczycki and Chad Newton
Bethel University
Roundtable: Human Resource Development

Abstract

Grounded in Issler's (2012) Christian character formation and Wreczycki's (2021) sustainable social value models, this research qualitatively analyzed six participants' responses to explore the perception of flourishing from the standpoint of the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of the human condition as a step toward the working definition of flourishing within the context of Christ-centered leadership. Four males and two females from three states participated representing the second through the fifth decades of life. Four participants identified as being affiliated with a Christian denomination and two served as unaffiliated to juxtapose the views. Based on three research questions inquiring about the agreement or disagreement with Issler's model and the role of self-awareness and emotional maturity and sovereignty to follow it, the perception of flourishing was probed and its operationalization within organizational contexts. Referencing the selected verses from the Scripture analyzed exegetically through Robbins' (1996) inner texture, Issler's model was applied to Christ to serve as a benchmark to compare perceptions of flourishing and their practical application within organizational contexts. Saldana (2009) in vivo coding method and Liamputtong and Ezzy's (2005) qualitative analysis method were used to derive themes and codes for interpretation to answer the research questions.

Keywords: Christian character formation, Christ-centered leadership, flourishing

Jankowski et al. (2020) analyzed virtue-ethics within the context of flourishing as not mere absence of physical symptoms but overall well-being and recommended the use of problem-focused psychotherapies to reduce physical symptoms to promote flourishing through well-being and virtue development. Arthur (2020) discussed the importance of character formation over the (a) classical, (b) medieval, (c) modern, and (d) contemporary periods emphasizing that the construct "does not lend itself a single fixed definition" (p. 1). Historically, the inculcation of character has been the assumed aim of national culture and educational systems. However, character formation has

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evolved with changing times, cultures, and educational systems proving to be remarkably resilient in importance. Yet, the delivery methods of knowledge sharing on character formation have been impacted by the evolution of technology, which provides at least in some cases anonymity. What in years past would pass the test of enduring values reposited in national culture and moral characters of the citizenry, now appears to be challenged. In Western culture, the importance of character formation dates to Aristotle (384–322 BC) whose philosophy was grounded in educating children informally and formally to shape their normative outlook as the best way of living and flourishing.

Literature Review

Issler (2012) pointed at the "willing-doing gap" (p. 16) as a universal challenge illustrating the difference between character growth potential and its position as currently perceived. Wreczycki (2021) emphasized the importance of self-awareness for emotional maturity and sovereignty to develop and sustain self-concept to be able to assess the impact of emotions, feelings, thoughts about them, and words on external environments before a decision to act is made. In contrast with the philosophical view of character formation, Ephesians 4:4–6 *(NIV)* states,

> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This scripture emphasizes the unity of believers of the Christian faith as the body of Christ sharing the same Spirit, hope, and purpose.

Christian Character Formation Model

Issler (2012) formulated five Christian character formation gaps such as (a) disconnected, (b) distress. (c) dismissive, (d) discrepancy, and (e) distractive, that are linear in nature. While the first gap is foundational, the second one can impair the effort of forming the heart. Wreczycki and Newton (2025) supported Issler's position pointing at the need to balance the affective and cognitive aspects of the moral character to avoid the disruption of the mental process. Naro et al. (2023) posited that there are three dimensions to character-based learner's development—(a) cognitive, (b) affective, and (c) psychomotor—that contribute to mental and physical health with the ability to adapt to external environments.

Disconnected Gap

Issler (2012) posited that the disconnected gap is foundational in nature and prevents a Christians from abiding in Christ. This state reflects no dependence on Christ as a

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matter of intention. The Scripture supports this stance in John 15:4 (*NIV)* that says "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." McIntyre (2025) referenced this verse to depict the struggles of people who have trouble getting into the Word of God to (a) read, (b) think about, (c) pray, and (d) turn inward to the heart toward Christ based on transformational grace bridging the text with present reality within the social context.

Distress Gap

Issler (2012) proposed that effectively managing emotional stress is paramount to continuing the heart formation in the direction of closure of the other three gaps. Wreczycki and Newton (2025) posited that quick recovery from emotional stress to aid self-awareness in leading to emotional sovereignty and then the use of self-concept as an assessment tool to weigh the social consequences of thoughts as cognitive aspects that generate affective feelings to abide in Christ results in moral choices that create sustainable social value. Prayer for transformational grace is depicted in Philippians 4:6 (*NIV)* that says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." AD (2023) recommended this verse as a starting point for all prayers to address anxiety.

Dismissive Gap

Issler (2012) interpreted this gap as an intentional closure of the mind to novel ideas. Based on Wreczycki and Newton (2025), reasoning represents the cognitive aspect of the human condition that goes out of balance due to emotional stress. Going back to closing the distress gap is paramount in progressing in heart formation. Matthew 13:15 (*NIV)* says,

> For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them.

Dans (2025) pointed at Matthew 13 as an effective way to dwell in Christ.

Discrepancy Gap

Issler (2012) warned about embracing ideas that are not deep in moral character. Matthew 13:20 (*NIV)* says, "The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy." Dans (2025) interpreted this verse as a call to examine the faith through intellectual inquiry and clarity, inspiration, and meeting of the mind and heart. Wreczycki and Newton (2025) referred to the latter as the mind–heart axis.

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Distractive Gap

Issler (2012) cautioned about drifting away from Christ's priorities like a ship at sea without a compass. Matthew 13:22 (*NIV) s*ays, "The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful." The steps of (a) awakening to the gaps based on trusting God and the Holy Spirit, (b) admitting the gaps with integrity, (c) asking God for transformation grace to close the gaps, and (d) acting on transformational grace to close the gaps with intentionality are the way to lead a Christ-centered life.

Sustainable Social Value Model

Wreczycki (2021) used a six-pillar model of (a) self-awareness, (b) emotional maturity, (c) emotional sovereignty, (d) self-concept, (e) deliberate ascent of will to abide in God, and (f) moral choices with constructive social consequences and emphasized the linear nature of the pillars. While self-awareness is foundational, emotional maturity leads to emotional sovereignty to control emotions and direct the will to abide in God to produce moral behavioral outcomes. While this approach focuses on self-development, based on Chandler (2022), the sustainable social value construct can also be interpreted more broadly as creating economic value through organizational responsibility and social value that goes beyond being monetary. In short, sustainable value encompasses the (a) social, (b) economic, and (c) environmental aspects of a community.

Self-Awareness

Wreczycki (2021) defined self-awareness as consciousness-grounded self-knowledge acquired through the process of living a meaningful life. Wreczycki posited that self-awareness assists in balancing the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition. Eurich (2018) identified four self-awareness archetypes: (a) the *aware* as the ones exhibiting high internal and external self-awareness relying on introspection and feedback from others; (b) the *introspects* as those exhibiting high internal and low external self-awareness due to not seeking feedback from others; (c) the *pleasers* exhibiting low internal and high external self-awareness and agape like self-sacrificing characteristics; and (d) the *seekers* as the ones not yet knowing who they are, what they want, and potentially vulnerable to being stuck on their life path. Balancing the scale of internal and external self-awareness results in highly self-aware individuals.

Emotional Maturity

Wreczycki (2021) defined emotional maturity as effectively managing emotions, so they do not take control over the cognitive and physical aspects of the human condition. Joy and Matthew (2018) referred to emotional maturity as the ability to stabilize the transitory emotions for a healthy emotional development. Jobson (2020) posited that

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emotional maturity is not dependent on (a) age, (b) gender, and (c) dynamics of the ancestral family.

Emotional Sovereignty

Wreczycki (2021) explained emotional sovereignty as the ability to derive self-worth from introspection by practicing emotional maturity. Eurich (2018) defined this type of emotional sovereignty as the introspective archetype exhibiting high internal self-awareness and low external self-awareness. Hence, Wreczycki's approach to interpreting and operationalizing emotional sovereignty may require balancing internal and external self-awareness.

Self-Concept

Wreczycki (2021) supported Knowles et al.'s (2015) working definition of self-concept as "being responsible for own decisions" (p. 44). However, a broader interpretation of accountability was proposed to encompass the ability to foresee the social implications of thoughts that generate feelings that can inform words and actions with social consequences. Based on Arrow et al.'s (2000) group dynamics, external feedback can be obtained to reinforce the self-concept before operationalization.

Deliberate Ascent of Will to Abide in God

Wreczycki (2021) interpreted the deliberate ascent of will to dwell in God through the lens of moral love referred to as a cornerstone of (a) principles, (b) duty, and (c) proprietary to act with righteousness for sustainable social value. Winston (2002) posited that the merge of human will with God's will is referred in classical Greek as *pneuma* or the breath of the Holy Spirit. While this phenomenon can be referred to as inspiration within the context of the human condition, according to Hensley's (2020) interpretation grounded in ancient Stoic philosophy, the breath of life can be classified as the natural elements of air and fire.

Moral Choices With Social Consequences

Wreczycki (2021) proposed that moral behavior is dependent on self-awareness. Eurich (2018) posited that self-awareness grounded in high internal and external self-awareness facilitates balance between internal and external feedback. Matthew 5:3–12 (*NIV) six* known as the Beatitudes, reveal Christ's traits of (a) care, (b) cohesion, (c) commitment, (d) humility, (e) integrity, (f) joy, (g) mercy, (h) perseverance, (i) self-restraint, and (j) social justice, which can be used to protect from "self-aggrandizement" (Winston, 2002, p. 14).

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Jungian Four Stages of Life

Jung and Hull (1973) posited that human life evolved based on four stages: (a) athlete, (b) warrior, (c) statement, and (d) spiritual. These phases reflect the relationship between a person and their psyche while transitioning from (a) the physical body orientation in youth, (b) the achievement orientation in early to middle adulthood, (c) the statement stage focused on others or being "others-centered" (Winston, 2002, p. 9), and (d) spirituality. The stages reflect an inner journey of (a) emotional, (b) psychological, (c) physical, and (d) spiritual development toward greater self-awareness and fulfillment.

Athlete

Jung and Hull grounded this stage in concentration on physical appearance. This phase is typically associated with the age of adolescence. The progression of time does not guarantee a successful transition to the warrior stage since some adults get stuck in this stage and exhibit increased preoccupation with their physical appearance and the fear of aging and dying. In adolescence, this stage can produce narcissistic behavioral outcomes that can deepen with age.

Warrior

Jung and Hull associated this stage with early to middle adulthood when individuals set professional goals to support personal goals. Traits such as ambition, creativity, and problem solving can accompany this phase. The risk associated with this phase is being unbalanced and moving in the direction of too much competition for personal gains at the expense of teamwork, leadership, and empowerment.

Statement

Jung and Hull grounded this stage in a change in orientation from being self-centered to "others-centered" (Winston, 2002, p. 9). At this phase of life, the desire to leave a legacy becomes important. Often, there must be a perception present that there is something more to life that accompanies the transition to this stage.

Spiritual

In this stage, Jung and Hull emphasized the change of perspective to focus on deeper meaning in life and spiritual development. This reorientation results in servanthood without sacrificing the self. Inner peace and acceptance are the hallmarks of this phase of life.

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Flourishing

For the current research, flourishing is defined as feeling satisfaction and joy from life's inputs and outputs within organizational contexts. The latter is interpreted as any relationship starting with the self, family, friends, professional colleagues, neighbors, and other persons encountered in public spaces or via technology. Although flourishing can be associated with personal development, it is important to ground it in social context to reflect its critical role of nurturing in relationships.

Research Questions

The literature review informed the qualitative research to extract the participants' perception of flourishing while agreeing or disagreeing with Issler's (2012) Christian character formation model. Also, the individual perception of flourishing was probed to explore how this state is operationalized within organizational contexts. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1: Wreczycki (2021) posited that social value is created and sustained based on six pillars: (a) self-awareness as conscious knowledge of the self, (b) emotional maturity as outgrowing emotions used as defense mechanisms in childhood, (c) emotional sovereignty as drawing self-worth from introspection to externalize it, (d) self-concept as the ability to assess the implications of potential actions on organizational environments prior to undertaking them, (e) deliberate ascent of will to abide in God or highest self for the unaffiliated, and (f) moral choices guiding behavioral outcomes with constructive organizational consequences. Do you agree that self-awareness and emotional sovereignty are necessary to conceptualize flourishing defined as feeling satisfaction and joy from life's inputs and outputs within organizational contexts?

RQ2: Issler (2012) proposed that Christian character formation, also known as heart formation, depends on life-long work to close five formation gaps: (a) being disconnected from God or highest self for the unaffiliated, (b) being emotionally distressed, (c) being dismissive as unwilling to explore novel ideas, (d) falling for perceptual discrepancies not yet morally validated, and (e) being distracted to let life drift off course. Do you agree with all pillars? If so, please provide brief support on how they apply in your life for flourishing. If all or some do not apply, please provide examples of other modalities to flourish.

RQ3: Since self-awareness and emotional sovereignty stabilize personhood for integrity in human interactions (Wreczycki & Newton, 2025), how do you balance the affective aspects such as (a) attitudes, (b) desires, (c)

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disposition, and (d) feelings with the cognitive ones such as (a) beliefs, (b) imagination, (c) cognitive dissonance as imbalance between cognition and feelings about it, and (d) acquired knowledge socially applied as wisdom to form your character for flourishing? Do you agree that the affective aspects can disturb the cognitive ones under stress? If so, what modality do you use to minimize stress for flourishing?

Method

Qualitative Method and Analysis

Three semi structured research questions were distributed by email, and written responses were collected via email. Liamputtong and Ezzy's (2005) qualitative analysis method was used to immerse into the content to extract themes. Themes were then translated into codes to identify underlying (a) emotions, (b) feelings, (c) thoughts, (d) words, and (e) actions with social implications to point at participants' values. Qualitative data are presented in the left column of each table as provided by participants in a narrative format. To derive meaning from the data, Saldana's (2009) in vivo coding method was used. The research required an openness to participants' perspectives to allow their ideas to emerge without bias.

Exegetical Methods and Analysis

To interpret the selected pericopes, Robbins' (1996) inner texture was used. It supported "the implied author, the narrator, and the characters who work together to communicate that message" (p. 28) approach. The nature of the exegetical analysis required continuous openness to allow the meaning to emerge from multiple angles.

The pericope for this study included the epistle of James 1:5-8. The methods of exegesis included Robbins's (1996) narrational and sensory aesthetic textures. A purpose for using these methods involved the belief that "relationships exist among word-phrase and narrational patterns that produce argumentative and aesthetic patterns in texts" (p. 46). Another purpose involved the goal "to gain an intimate knowledge of words, patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text" (p. 7).

The following pericope represents the chosen date for analysis:

> But if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and he will be given it. But he should ask in faith, not doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, since he is a man of two minds, unstable in all his ways.

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Narrational Texture

The "narrational texture resides in voices through which the words in texts speak. The opening words in a text automatically presuppose a narrator speaking the words" (Robbins, 1996, p. 15). In the pericope, James narrated to the "twelve tribes of the Diaspora" (DeSilva, 2004, p. 817). Most Catholic scholars uphold the traditional teaching that the author represents a half-brother of Jesus and a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. "Most scholars agree that it would be most natural to regard the intended readership as Jewish Christians," a group known as the proselytes (p. 818) who represented the original audience of Matthew's Gospel. In the pericope, James addressed the variously scattered proselytes within the Roman region. The passage's narrational texture involved a cause-and-effect structure. Lacking wisdom considered as a cause leads to asking God, who generously provides it considered as an effect. The texture emphasized the consequences of doubt by framing the doubter as being "driven and tossed by the wind," and therefore unable to receive God's gifts. However, James stated "that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" who exhibits doubt. By this passage, the narrator stated a consequence for a wavering mind that drifted between two different beliefs or desires, thus showing inconsistency and unreliability. At the same time, the Catholic scholars recognized that an interpretation of James 1:8 required a consideration of mental illness. From a theological sense, an unstable mind referred to a spiritual condition that affected a person's entire life, while mental illness referred to a separate but related issue that required compassion and care.

Sensory-Aesthetic Texture

According to Robbins (1996), "The sensory-aesthetic texture of a text resides predominately in the range of senses the text evokes or embodies and the manner in which the text evokes or embodies them" (p. 29). The pericope contained a "zone of emotion-fused thought": the mind (p. 30). According to the Catholic tradition, an interpretation of doublemindedness involved a conflict between loyalty to God and the service of other things, such as material wealth. The idea of spiritual instability referred to a state of half-hearted allegiance, where one tries to serve two masters. Fromm (1976) described this phenomenon as one being divided between two modes of existence such as having orientation to life and being orientation. Having orientation pertained to the belief in consuming things to build one's sense of complete self. It represented an acquisitive approach to life's challenges and surviving during struggles. However, Fromm (1976) argued that having orientation led to a dehumanization of the person because the person based his or her sense of being on the insatiable acquisition of objects, materials, and relationships. If the person loses all acquired things, then the person existentially becomes nothingness as an empty sense of self created by the loss of most or all acquired things. The alternative approach involved being orientated to life, which is a mode of existence focused on experience, connection, and personal growth.

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This mode included the spiritual dimension which provided a sense of higher calling or a vocational perception of the self that united all aspects of a person's existence. Based on the pericope, the analysis showed that a firm believer upholds the conviction that God existed and that He revealed Himself through Jesus Christ. Due to this conviction, the believer needed a strong connection between his or her spiritual beliefs and the values contained in the mind. The mind-body relationship needed alignment for the person to act faithfully and receive God's assistance and transformational grace.

Results

The study included six participants. Four were male, and two were female. Four participants were affiliated with Christian denominations, and two were unaffiliated. Participants represented the second through the fifth decades of life interpreted via the Jungian stages of life: (a) athlete, (b) warrior, (c) statement, and (d) spiritual. The participants contributed written responses to three research questions. The answers were analyzed qualitatively to extract themes that were then converted to a one-word code to represent underlying traits. The traits were then compared to Christ's characteristics as extracted from the selected verses of the Scripture and analyzed exegetically.

Participant 1

Participant 1 was a male in his early 20s. He resides in Rhode Island. He is a laboratory professional. He referred to himself as unaffiliated.

Table 1: Participant 1: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
Yeah, I totally agree with that. Self-awareness and emotional sovereignty are key when thinking about flourishing in an organizational context, especially when flourishing means feeling satisfaction and joy from everything you put into and get out of life, work included. If you do not have a good sense of self-awareness, it is hard to know what makes you happy or fulfilled, both personally and professionally. And emotional	Emphasized self-awareness and emotional sovereignty while conceptualizing flourishing. Agreed with the working definition of flourishing as feeling satisfaction and joy. Emphasized feeling happy and fulfilled in both	Self-aware Emotionally sovereign Flourishing Happy Fulfilled Grounded

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Content	Themes	Codes
sovereignty gives you the ability to stay grounded and handle the difficulties at work without losing your sense of well-being. When you have both, it is easier to find joy and satisfaction in your work and your life.	personal and professional contexts	Resilient
I think Issler's five gaps really get to the heart of what can block us from flourishing, both in a Christian sense and more broadly. Feeling disconnected from a higher purpose, whether spiritual or personal, it is huge, it is tough to thrive if you do not feel grounded in something meaningful. Emotional distress also stands in the way because it makes it hard to enjoy life or make clear decisions. Staying open to innovative ideas is important, too; if we close ourselves off, we miss opportunities for growth. The idea of falling for unvalidated beliefs makes me think about how it is important to question what we hear and think critically, so we can align our lives with truth. And then there is the whole issue of distraction, when we let life drift, we can easily lose track of what truly matters. Personally, I have found that focusing on purpose, emotional well-being, openness, and intentionality really helps me stay on track for flourishing. Plus, being kind to myself, nurturing relationships, and	Emphasized the connection between Issler's model and flourishing. Pointed at the importance of higher purpose as a guiding principle to live a meaningful life. Identified emotional distress as an obstacle to joy and mental clarity. Interpreted open-mindedness as critical to growth. Discussed the importance of discernment in processing external stimuli. Focused on truth	Flourishing Principled Meaningful Balanced Open Growth Discerning Authentic

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Content	Themes	Codes
always learning new things also help me find myself.	Discussed distraction as an obstacle to meaningful and purposeful life. Pointed at kindness toward himself as a road sign for self-discovery. Emphasized nurturing relationships to learn and find himself within his organizational contexts.	Focused Meaningful Purposeful Well-being Open Intentionality Kindness Nurturing Learning Relating
Balancing emotions (attitudes, desires, feelings) with thoughts (beliefs, imagination, wisdom) is tricky, but it is essential for flourishing. Emotions can be immediate and reactive, while our beliefs and knowledge are more grounded and thoughtful. The challenge is when they are out of balance, like when you believe one thing but feel something else, causing tension and confusion especially if emotional distress gets in the way. When you are stressed, it is easy for emotions to take over, and that imbalance makes it harder to stick to your values. To manage this, I use a few things that help me stay grounded, like mindfulness to stay aware of my emotions without letting them control me. I use things like my	Designated the balancing of the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition as necessary for flourishing. Pointed at cognitive dissonance as a factor in flourishing. Identified watching emotions to control them, spending time with a pet, and playing video games to stabilize and be composed for well-being and long-term growth	Balanced Flourishing Grounded Value-based Mindfulness Stable Composed Well-being Growth

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Content	Themes	Codes
pet and video games to help me stabilize and regain composure. These practices help me align my emotions with my beliefs, so I can act in ways that support my well-being and long-term growth.		

Research Question 1

The participant affirmed the importance of self-awareness and emotional sovereignty for flourishing based on its working definition. The traits that emerged from the content and themes were (a) emotional sovereignty, (b) flourishing, (c) fulfillment, (d) grounding, (e) happiness, (f) resilience, and (g) self-awareness. The participant is actively practicing self-awareness through introspection and validation within the context of nourishing personal and professional environments and emotional control for sovereignty.

Research Question 2

The participant agreed with Issler's (2012) model in its entirety. The traits that emerged from content and themes were (a) authenticity, (b) balance, (c) discernment, (d) flourishing, (e) focus, (f) growth, (g) intentionality, (h) kindness, (i) learning, (j) meaningfulness—repeated twice, (k) nurturing, (l) openness—repeated twice, (m) principled, (n) purposeful, (o) relating, and (p) well-being. The traits of meaningfulness and openness emerged twice.

Research Question 3

The participant agreed with the need to balance the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition for emotional balance and flourishing. The traits that emerged were (a) balanced, (b) composed, (c) flourishing, (d) grounded, (e) growth-oriented, (f) mindful, (g) stable, (h) value-based, and (i) well-being. The participant pointed at (a) mindfulness, (b) playing with a pet, and (c) playing video games as modalities to minimize emotional stress for flourishing.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was a female in her late 20s affiliated with a Christian denomination. She resides in Rhode Island. She is an administrative professional in the transportation sector.

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Table 2: Participant 2: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
I agree with the need to use self-awareness and emotional sovereignty to balance the affective and cognitive aspects to grow and flourish. Since emotions and feelings fuel cognition and cognition stir up emotions and feelings, monitoring emotions for emotional balance is paramount. Self-awareness is critical for self-observation and introspection. As an administrative professional, I ensure to compare my introspection externally within the organizational context. I rely on my faith for emotional balance to ensure that my thinking and feelings are aligned with my values. I pray to God for grace to stay in balance to live a fulfilled life.	Agreed with self-awareness to control emotions and sustain emotional autonomy. Emphasized the reliance on faith for emotional balance and cognitive soundness.	Self-aware Composed Balanced Autonomous Spiritual
I agree with Issler's pillars. For me dwelling in God is who I am. I pray to God to stay balanced emotionally and cognitively to live my life like a prayer. I draw energy from my living and deceased ancestors who I believe look down on me to ensure that my life has a meaning and purpose with my mind open and appreciative heart. With God, everything is possible. So, I pray for my family, health, and the fulfillment of my goals. I also pray for peace in these trying	Emphasized the closeness to God for inspiration and perseverance to stay emotionally balanced to apply the intellect, skills, and talents within the organizational contexts. Pointed at the importance of prayer for health and fulfillment of goals. Focused on external conditions necessary to	Self-aware Devoted Balanced Reverence Spiritual Trust Charitable Grace

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Content	Themes	Codes
times. My positive outlook has influence. I thank God for gracing me with patience and responsibility to do self-work and apply the results daily. I step out of my church ready for the week and cannot wait to come back to share with God what my week has been.	live a healthy and fulfilling life. Being in a good relationship with God, applies the same approach to others with an open mind and heart.	
I wholeheartedly agree with the need to be emotionally balanced to have constructive thoughts focused on health, family, and personal and professional fulfillment. To support my balance, I enjoy reading, listening to music, spending time with my family and my church family, photography, journaling, and celebrating Christmas and Easter.	Emphasized the importance of emotional and cognitive balance. To minimize emotional stress, pursues hobbies and stays connected with God, family, and church family.	Balanced Grounded Traditional Structured Devoted

Research Question 1

The participant agreed with the role of self-awareness to ensure management of emotions for emotional sovereignty. The traits that emerged were (a) autonomous, (b) balanced, (c) composed, and (d) spiritual. The participant's predominant theme was the emphasis of faith for emotional balance and cognitive soundness.

Research Question2

The participant agreed with all pillars of Issler's (2012) model. The traits that emerged were (a) balanced, (b) charity, (c) devotion, (d) grace, (e) reverence, (f) self-awareness, (g) spirituality, and (h) trust. The overarching theme was abiding in God for inspiration and perseverance to stay emotionally balanced to apply the intellect, skills, and talents within the organizational contexts.

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Research Question 3

The participant agreed with the need to manage emotional stress to balance the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition. The traits that emerged were (a) balanced, (b) devoted, (c) grounded, (d) structured, and (e) traditional. The overarching theme was the emphasis of emotional and cognitive balance.

Participant 3

Participant 3 was a male in his mid-30s affiliated with a Christian denomination. He resides in Rhode Island. He is a management professional in the manufacturing sector.

Table 3: Participant 3: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
Yes, I agree. All the points mentioned are essential to the experience and conceptualization of flourishing. They help us navigate complex situations with clarity, contribute meaningfully, and derive joy from both the process and the impact of our work. Early in my career, I struggled to separate constructive criticism of my work product from my sense of self-worth. Over time, I have learned that to be an effective leader and grow as an individual I must detach my identity from external evaluations and instead draw confidence from self-examination and personal growth.	Agreed with self-awareness and emotional sovereignty to flourish. Emphasized the importance of emotional and conceptual clarity and detachment to create meaning and feel joy. Shared self-development journey grounded in self-worth to grow. Pointed at the need to disassociate from external opinions to derive confidence internally.	Self-awareness Emotional sovereignty Flourishing Clarity Detachment Introspection Meaningfulness Joy Self-development Self-worth Growth Independent Confident
I agree with all five pillars. These pillars resonate as universal principles for personal integrity,	Agreed with all pillars of Issler's model.	Integrity Balance

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Content	Themes	Codes
emotional health, and purposeful living. Together they form a roadmap for flourishing that combines spiritual, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Through faith in God flourishing has come from aligning decisions with a deeper sense of purpose. One guiding principal I learned early on during my days in Catholic school is WWJD—What Would Jesus Do. A simple yet deep question that helps me navigate ethical choices, lead with compassion, and stay grounded in values that guide me through uncertainty. Chronic emotional stress makes it hard to think clearly, recover from setbacks, and keep good relationships. I have found that managing stress through mindfulness and reflection helps me stay focused, make better decisions, and feel more balanced. Being unwilling to explore innovative ideas is a major obstacle to growth. This is especially true in organizational settings, where innovation, adaptability, and continuous improvement are essential for long-term success. Growth often comes from persevering through demanding situations, especially when those situations challenge us to think differently, take risks, and embrace change. Distraction makes it hard to stay focused, have clear goals, and build strong relationships. For me, sticking to	Disclosed that abiding in God provides deeper sense of purpose. Emphasized following Jesus while making decisions. Pointed at compassion, which is externalized as empathy as a trait to stay grounded in moral values. Cited mindfulness and reflection as modalities to manage emotional stress.	Purpose Flourishing Spirituality Contemplative Purposeful Principled Compassionate Empathetic Grounded Moral Balanced Mindfulness Reflection

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Content	Themes	Codes
routines, taking time to reflect, and setting goals helps to stay on track at work and in my personal life.	Emphasized being open-minded as a path to growth. Referenced being open-minded to facilitate innovation, adaptability, improvement, perseverance, and success. Highlighted being on schedule to achieve goals while self-reflecting.	Focused Open-minded Growth Innovation Adaptability Success Improvement Perseverance Scheduled Reflective
I have learned that balancing emotions and thoughts is key to building strong character and living well. Feelings like attitude, desire, and mood shape how I react to things, while beliefs, imagination, and knowledge guide how I make decisions. When I am stressed, my emotions can sometimes cloud my thinking and make it harder to stay focused or make good choices. I agree that emotional stress can affect how we think. I rely on routines, quiet reflection, setting clear goals, and talking with trusted people. These habits help	Pointed at the need to balance the affective and cognitive aspects to make moral decisions. Rely on schedules and quiet reflection for goal setting and maintaining relationships with trusted people to stay calm, focused, and connected to things that matter most.	Balanced Moral Scheduled Reflection Relatable Trust Calm Focused Connected

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Content	Themes	Codes
me stay calm, focused, and connected to what matters most.		

Research Question 1

The participant agreed that self-awareness and emotional sovereignty are essential to flourishing as defined. The traits that emerged from content and themes were (a) clarity, (b) confidence, (c) detachment, (d) joy, (e) growth, (f) independence, (g) meaningfulness, (h) self-development, and (i) self-worth. The participant emphasized practicing detachment to draw confidence from introspection.

Research Question 2

The participant agreed that self-awareness and emotional sovereignty are necessary to flourish. Traits that emerged were (a) adaptability, (b) balance—repeated twice, (c) compassion, (d) contemplation, (e) empathy, (f) focus, (g) goal orientation, (h) grounded, (i) growth-oriented, (j) improvement-focused, (k) innovative, (l) integrity, (m) mindfulness, (n) moral, (o) open-minded, (p) perseverance, (q) principled, (r) purposeful, (s) reflective—repeated twice, (t) scheduled, (u) spiritual, and (v) successful. The traits of being balanced and reflective repeated twice.

Research Question 3

The participant agreed with the need to balance the effective and cognitive aspects for flourishing. The traits that emerged were (a) balanced, (b) calmness, (c) connection, (d) focused, (e) moral, (f) relatable, (g) reflective, (h) scheduled, and (i) trust. The participant relies on (a) schedules, (b) quiet reflection, (c) goal setting, and (d) conversing with trusted people to stay calm, focused, and connected to most meaningful matters.

Participant 4

Participant 4 was a female in her early 40s affiliated with a Christian denomination. She resides in Massachusetts. She is an administrative professional in the manufacturing sector.

Table 4: Participant 4: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
Yes, I believe that, only when one has truly identified who they believe they are, even if only for	Agreed with self-awareness as a vehicle to arrive at self-concept	Authenticity Reflective

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Content	Themes	Codes
that moment in time, and recognizes their identity within personal, familial, and social constructs, they are able to feel personal satisfaction.	operationalized within personal, family, and social environments to flourish.	Self-awareness Self-concept Sovereignty Satisfaction
At various points in life, it can be considered normal to feel disconnected from God, and it is only when one is able to "soul-search" (so to speak), that they may find their way back to God. Human beings who value God will typically either cite their trust in God to get them through various difficult times in life such as (b), (c), (d), and (e), or work through their individual experiences and then retrospectively cite their faith as what helped to guide them through such life experiences. Many people, throughout the hectic nature of life, may find themselves drawn away from God and/or church but, during emotionally distressful times in their lives, will seek guidance or solace from God to help them through challenging times in their lives.	Agreed with all pillars of Issler's model. Emphasized trust in God as a guide to go through and recover from temporary emotional distress. Pointed at the transitional nature of one's relationship with God—leaving and returning depending on the stages of life.	Confidence Guidance Reflective Solace Spiritual Trust
While affective character elements may influence cognitive character elements, I believe the effects to be temporary and that the cognitive character elements hold strong enough to guide oneself back to one's true self. Internal conflicts may develop during that time, which I believe help to make	Emphasized the cognitive aspects as the security system for the affective ones going out of balance. Pointed at internal conflicts to discover the true self.	Authentic Balanced Focused Guided Inquisitive Merciful

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Content	Themes	Codes
one sure of the person they truly are. My moral guidance may be temporarily affected by certain attitudes, desires, and feelings, but will lose when tested against my beliefs and moral compass.	Reflected on moral fortitude as subject to potential but temporary affective elements of the human condition. Emphasized the role of beliefs and moral compass in minimizing emotional stress for flourishing.	Moral Reflective

Research Question 1

The participant agreed with the role of self-awareness and emotional sovereignty to promote flourishing as defined. The traits that emerged were (a) authenticity, (b) self-concept as the ability to foresee the personal and social implications of the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition before undertaking any action, (c) reflection, and (d) satisfaction equated with flourishing. The participant paired authenticity and self-concept as a guide to flourishing.

Research Question 2

The participant agreed with all pillars of Isser's (2012) model. The traits that emerged were (a) guidance, (b) reflection—as a form of faith-based contemplation, (c) solace, (d) spirituality, and (d) abiding in God with trust. The participant emphasized that brief periods of emotional distress can test the faith but trust in God as present and emanating forth as trust in the self to follow the moral compass are redemptive. Both qualities result in recovering from emotional stress to find a way back to God and to the self with confidence.

Research Question 3

Although the participant acknowledged the interaction between the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition as potentially disrupting emotional balance, the perceived impact is believed to be temporary. The traits that emerged were (a) authenticity, (b) balance, (c) focus, (d) guidance, (e) being inquisitive, (f) merciful, (g) moral, and (h) reflective. The participant emphasized the friction between the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition and pointed at her trust in God and reliance on her beliefs and moral compass to guide her through the trying times.

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Participant 5

Participant 5 was a male in his early 50s affiliated with a Christian denomination. He resides in Rhode Island. He is an executive employee in the manufacturing sector.

Table 5: Participant 5: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
I do believe that self-awareness is vital to producing maturity and growth which in turn leads to self-improvement. That in theory will yield a greater sense of well-being (emotional health) which in turn can be projected outward in the form of a positive attitude and charity.	Acknowledged the role of self-awareness and emotional health in flourishing is interpreted as constructive behavior and charity.	Authenticity Charity Development Emotional health Maturity Positive attitude Self-improvement Well-being
I agree with these pillars, but I will say that I was a bit unclear on the meaning of point (d). The main principles I use to attempt to flourish are perspective and gratitude, both of which I attribute to my Christian faith. It can be easy to have moments of self-pity when things do not go well; that's human nature. But in those moments, I step back and recognize how blessed I am (gratitude), and while things may be difficult in a particular moment, I think "it could always be worse" (perspective). In fact, many people do have things much worse on a regular basis; they live with poverty, war, hunger, etc., things most of us could never imagine.	Agreed with the pillars of Issler's model. Attributed the traits of gratitude and perspective to faith. Acknowledged the opposite spectrum of the human condition. With humility and gratitude, the participant feels blessed, which can be equated with flourishing.	Blessed Gratitude Humility Perspective Trust

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Content	Themes	Codes
If I am interpreting this correctly, I characterize the affective character elements vs. cognitive ones as "heart versus mind" (or emotional versus cerebral). And in that sense, I absolutely agree that affective can disturb cognitive in high-pressure situations. That is a common experience. I tend to be more stoic by nature, so while I am not immune to emotional reactions, I do feel that those reactions do not usually produce a positive outcome. To reduce emotional stress, I engage in physical activity when possible. I also try to keep a routine of journaling in the morning to clear my head.	Interpreted the affective vs. cognitive aspects of the human condition as heart vs. mind or emotional vs. cerebral. Emphasized that the affective aspect can disturb the cognitive ones at least temporarily under pressure.	Composed Expressive Reflective Stoic Universal

Research Question 1

The participant acknowledged the role of self-awareness and emotional health in flourishing interpreted as constructive behavior and charity. The traits that emerged were (a) authenticity, (b) charity, (c) development, (d) emotional health, (e) maturity, (f) positivity, (g) self-improvement, and (h) well-being. The participant tied self-awareness and emotional sovereignty as facilitators of the values associated with the emergent traits.

Research Question 2

The participant agreed with all pillars of Issler's (2012) model. The characteristics that emerged from content and themes were (a) blessed, (b) grateful, (c) humble, (d) perspective, and (e) trust. The participants attributed gratitude and perspective to his faith.

Research Question 3

The participant agreed that the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition can experience friction. The participant associated the affective aspects with the heart as

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an emotional core and the cognitive ones as the mind or the cerebral center. The traits that emerged from the content and themes were (a) composed, (b) expressive, (c) reflective, (d) stoic, and (e) universal. The participant shared the engagement with physical activity to balance his affective aspects and journaling to balance the cognitive ones.

Participant 6

Participant 6 was an unaffiliated male in his mid-50s. He resides on the West Coast. He is an executive professional in marketing.

Table 6: Participant 6: Content, Themes, and Codes

Content	Themes	Codes
I do agree that both self-awareness and emotional sovereignty are necessary to do anything that requires conceptualization and flourishing. Also, self-awareness and detachment that is emotional sovereignty by another name are the cornerstones of the Buddhist philosophy.	Agreed with self-awareness and emotional sovereignty as necessary for flourishing. Referenced the Buddhist philosophy as grounded in self-awareness and detachment interpreted as emotional sovereignty.	Self-aware Emotionally sovereign Grounded Detached
I agree with Issler's pillars. In Buddhism, emotional control and introspection are the pillars. They contribute to the feeling of being connected to something bigger and to openness of the mind. Both pillars safeguard me from making morally ambiguous decisions. This promotes living a life anchored in moral principles and on course. I visit botanical gardens and walk on the beach to spend time in nature. I also reduce my exposure to technology as it disassociates us from our inner connectiveness.	Pointed at the Buddhism philosophy as the source of emotional control as emotional maturity by another name. Emphasized openness to assimilate innovative ideas based on moral framework. Shared communing with nature as a way of balancing the affective and cognitive aspects.	Anchored Balanced Grounded Introspective Moral Open-minded Self-Directed Attuned to nature Balanced

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Content	Themes	Codes
	Emphasized unplugging from technology to minimize the risk of disassociation from connecting with others in person.	Unplugged Connected
Technology has a way of disrupting our genuine feelings. To minimize the impact of technology on my affective and cognitive aspects, I spend time in nature and introspect. The main thing is that disassociation from technology promotes connectivity with nature to feel balanced emotionally, cognitively, physically, and spiritually. Dismantling of the ego is helpful to feel satisfied with life situations whether they are expected or not and feel satisfaction and joy regardless of the circumstances. There will, of course, be moments during which satisfaction and joy are harder to find. If such is the case, that is a signal for me to go deeper into introspection.	Pointed at technology as a disruptor of the ability to balance the affective and cognitive aspects. Spend time in nature to balance the affective and cognitive aspects. Diminishes the cognitive aspects to blend with the affective ones for satisfaction and joy.	Detached Balanced Introspective Connected Satisfied Joyful

Research Question 1

The participant affirmed the need for self-awareness and emotional sovereignty to balance the affective and cognitive aspects and flourish. The traits that emerged were

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detachment and grounding. The participant relies on the Buddhist philosophy to direct self-awareness to balancing the affective and cognitive aspects for flourishing.

Research Question 2

The participant agreed with the pillars of Issler's (2012) model. The traits that emerged from content and themes were (a) anchored, (b) attuned to nature, (c) balanced—repeated twice, (d) grounded, (e) introspective, (f) moral, (g) open-minded, (h) self-directed, and (i) unplugged.

Research Question 3

The participant acknowledged the need to balance the affective and cognitive aspects of the human condition. The traits that emerged from content and themes were (a) balanced, (b) connected, (c) detached, (d) introspective, (e) joyful, and (f) satisfied. The participant pointed at disconnecting from technology to feel associated with the conventional rather than virtual community, spending time in nature, and introspecting to measure his balance and reset if needed.

Discussion

The six participants' content, themes, and codes are summarized in Table 7. Participants affirmed all research questions. Leading traits of each question are listed.

Table 7

Participants' Summary of Leading Traits Across Research Questions

Participant	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
1: Male, not affiliated, early 20s	Affirmed with being grounded	Affirmed with being balanced	Affirmed with being balanced
2: Female, affiliated, late 20s	Affirmed with being balanced	Affirmed with being balanced	Affirmed with being balanced
3: Male, affiliated, mid-30s	Affirmed with clarity	Affirmed with being balanced	Affirmed with being balanced
4: Female, affiliated, early 40s	Affirmed with authenticity	Affirmed with confidence	Affirmed with authenticity
5: Male, affiliated, early 50s	Affirmed with authenticity	Affirmed with trust	Affirmed with being composed

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Participant	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
6: Male, not affiliated, mid-50s	Affirmed with being grounded	Affirmed with being balanced	Affirmed with balanced

The Jungian stages of life were applied to each participant based on their content, themes, and codes. The male and female participants ages between early 20s and mid-30s were classified as warriors focused on professional and personal achievements. The female and male participants ages between early-40s and early 50s were classified as statement persons based on their others-centered orientation. The oldest male participant in his mid-50s was classified as spiritual focusing on meaning. Table 8 summarizes the results.

Table 8 : Participants' Jungian Stage of Life Affiliation

Participant	Jungian stage of life
1	Warrior
2	Warrior
3	Warrior
4	Statement
5	Statement
6	Spiritual

Table 9 represents the themes and codes derived from five selected pericopes related to the pillars of Issler's (2012) Christian character formation model. The traits that emerged in relation to being connected to God were (a) balance, (b) connection, (c) mutual aid, and (d) sustainability. The traits that emerged in relation to emotional distress were (a) doubt, (b) being emotionally volatile, and (c) unbalanced. The traits that emerged in relation to dismissiveness of facts were (a) authenticity, (b) courage, and (c) openness. The traits that emerged in relation to false beliefs were (a) authenticity, (b) courage, and (c) receptivity. The traits that emerged in relation to being distracted were (a) authenticity, (b) courage, and (c) focus.

Table 9: Christ's Traits Across the Pillars of Issler's (2012) Model

Content	Themes	Codes
John 15:4–5 (NIV): "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in	Connecting with integrated self and God.	Balanced Connection

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Content	Themes	Codes
the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."	Mutual dependence and sustainability.	Mutual aid Sustainability
Matthew27:46 (NIV): "About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"	Experienced emotional distress.	Doubtful Emotional Unbalanced
Matthew 13:15 (NIV): "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes."	Warned against dismissiveness of facts.	Authenticity Courage Openness
Mark 4:16 (NIV): "Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy."	Warned against false beliefs.	Authenticity Courage Receptivity
Matthew 13:22 (NIV): "The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful."	Warned against being in a distracted state.	Authenticity Courage Focus

Table 10 repeats Christ's traits across the pillars of Issler's (2012) model. It also identifies synchronicity across participants. The traits are synchronized as (a) authenticity, (b) balance, (c) focus, and (d) openness.

Table 10

Christ's Traits Across Issler's (2012) Model and Participants' Synchronicity

Christ	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Balanced Connected Mutual aid Sustainability	Balanced	Balanced	Balanced	Balanced		Balanced

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Christ	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Doubtful Emotional Unbalanced						
Authenticity Courage Openness	Authenticity Openness		 Openness	Authenticity	Authenticity	 Openness
Authenticity Courage Receptivity	Authenticity			Authenticity	Authenticity	
Authenticity Courage Focus	Authenticity Focus		 Focus	Authenticity Focus	Authenticity	

Limitations and Future Direction

The limitations of this qualitative study are associated with its geographical scope involving participants from three states located in the southwestern and northeastern regions of the United States. It would be worthwhile to request responses from participants of different states to represent the southeastern, the Midwest, and the northwest regions. It would be helpful to include the perspectives of participants of faiths other than Christianity.

Conclusion

Based on Issler's (2012) Christian character formation and Wreczycki's (2021) sustainable social value models, this study qualitatively analyzed six participants' responses to assess their perception of flourishing within the context of the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual aspects of the human condition as a step toward the working definition of flourishing in Christ-centered leadership. Four males and two females aged between early 20s and mid-50s residing in three states located in two United States regions provided narrative responses. Four participants identified themselves as being affiliated with the Christian tradition and two as nones. Based on three research questions probing the agreement or disagreement with Issler's model and the role of self-awareness and emotional maturity and sovereignty to follow it, the perception of flourishing was examined and its operationalization within organizational contexts.

Based on the selected verses from the Scripture analyzed exegetically through Robbins' (1996) inner texture, Issler's (2012) model was applied to Christ to reference as a

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benchmark on perceptions of flourishing and their application within organizational contexts. Saldana's (2009) in vivo coding method and Liamputtong and Ezzy's (2005) qualitative analysis method were used to extract themes and translate them into one-word codes for interpretation to answer the research questions. While all participants affirmed all research questions agreeing that self-awareness and emotional sovereignty were necessary to flourish within the context of Christ-centered leadership based on Issler's moral character or heart formation model, they brought noteworthy and revealing insights as to their justification to support their stances.

About the Authors

Alina Wreczycki, PhD, is an alum at Regent University School of Business & Leadership in Organizational Leadership and HRD. Dr. Wreczycki studies national cultures as repositories of values and the rights and obligations of citizens. Dr. Wreczycki's dissertation topic was American women in leadership. Dr. Wreczycki has published seven articles in peer-reviewed journals on topics such as (a) agility in the age of amalgamation and the role of HRD, (b) gender and race equality, (c) HRD and group cohesion, (d) servant leadership, (e) unity in the presence of diversity, (f) courage to act with authenticity and transparency for sustainable social value–compassion with boundaries versus narcissism in collaboration with Dr. Chad Newton, and (g) balance between engaged and disengaged, being in this world but not of it in collaboration with Dr. Newton. Contact Dr. Wreczycki at alinwre@mail.regent.edu.

Dr. Chad Newton received his PhD in Organizational Leadership and HRD from Regent University, his M.S. in HRM from Nazareth College, and his B.S. in Management from Roberts Wesleyan University. The 2025 Roundtable represents his 7th annual presentation since 2018. Dr. Newton has over 15 peer-reviewed publications in journals and academic books on leadership theory, workforce development, and adult learning by companies like IGI Global, Wiley, and Palgrave. His main emphases in qualitative methodology include phenomenology, narrative analysis, interview coding, and systems theory. As a Byzantine Catholic, Dr. Newton indulges in historical theology which examines 2,000 years of Judeo-Christian beliefs. Contact Dr. Newton at newtonchadm.s@gmail.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Nurturing Flourishing Through Christ-Centered Leadership: A Biblical Case Study of Organizational Commitment and Support in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12

Matt Hattabaugh
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study examines the servant leadership model of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 as a biblical framework for human flourishing in organizational contexts. Writing to a young and persecuted church, Paul presents a leadership philosophy defined by moral integrity, relational presence, and sacrificial investment. Using a socio-rhetorical exegetical approach, this paper analyzes the inner, intertextual, and cultural textures of the passage to show how Paul's covenantal leadership subverts Greco-Roman honor norms and exemplifies Christ-centered authority. His refusal to manipulate, his nurturing metaphors, and his willingness to share his life with the community cultivate conditions that mirror contemporary constructs such as perceived organizational support (POS), affective organizational commitment, and person-organization fit (P-O fit). By integrating Pauline exegesis with organizational leadership theory, this study argues that biblical servant leadership fosters trust, belonging, and missional resilience, particularly within cross-cultural and faith-based organizations. While findings indicate that Pauline leadership is both theologically grounded and organizationally practical, further empirical research is necessary to assess its measurable impact across diverse ministry settings. Accordingly, this study raises the following question: How do biblically grounded servant leadership models, such as Paul's in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, influence POS and employee flourishing in cross-cultural, faith-based organizations?

Keywords: servant leadership, organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, person-organization fit, human flourishing

The increasing emphasis on human flourishing in leadership literature invites Christian scholars and practitioners to revisit biblical models that ground organizational health in spiritual identity and moral integrity. Flourishing is often defined in terms of

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psychological well-being, value congruence, and meaningful engagement (Cameron, 2012; Seligman, 2011). However, Scripture articulates a more theologically integrated vision, rooted in *shalom*, covenantal belonging, and Christ-centered transformation. In this study, the Apostle Paul's leadership in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is examined as a biblical case study in servant leadership that cultivates flourishing through relational embodiment, moral consistency, and spiritual exhortation.

Using a socio-rhetorical exegetical approach (Robbins, 1996), this paper analyzes how Paul's leadership functions within its Greco-Roman context and how it anticipates key constructs in organizational theory, including perceived organizational support (POS), affective commitment, and person-organization fit (P-O fit). Paul's refusal to manipulate, his nurturing metaphors of mother and father, and his incarnational posture of "sharing our lives" (v. 8) demonstrate a leadership model grounded not in control or charisma, but in covenantal presence. This model holds particular relevance for faith-based organizations, church-planting efforts, and cross-cultural ministry contexts where trust, resilience, and vocational alignment are essential to sustained flourishing.

Theoretical Framework: Servant Leadership and Human Flourishing

Servant leadership has emerged as a distinct and influential paradigm within the broader field of organizational leadership studies, particularly in contexts that emphasize ethical responsibility, employee well-being, and transformational outcomes. Initially articulated by Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership reframes traditional power structures by centering the leader's role on serving others. Greenleaf's (1977) emphasis on listening, empathy, and stewardship has since been developed into measurable constructs by contemporary scholars (Eva et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014). Recent research confirms this relationship empirically: a meta-analysis by Hernaus et al. (2021) demonstrated that servant leadership significantly increases organizational commitment by fostering follower well-being and ethical climates. Christian scholars have welcomed servant leadership as deeply congruent with biblical teaching, particularly the example of Jesus, who declared, "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant" (*New American Standard Bible* [NASB], 1971/2020, Mark 10:43). In particular, van Dierendonck (2011) notes that servant leadership fosters a favorable organizational climate by enhancing trust, authenticity, and personal development—conditions essential to human flourishing.

Human flourishing, as explored in organizational studies, encompasses more than productivity or job satisfaction. It reflects a holistic state in which individuals experience purpose, connection, growth, and well-being (Cameron, 2012; Seligman,

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2011). Within Christian theology, this aligns with the biblical concept of *shalom*, a vision of peace and wholeness rooted in right relationship with God and others. When servant leadership is practiced in a Christ-centered manner, it can contribute to a flourishing organizational culture marked by justice, belonging, and spiritual maturity.

Furthermore, several constructs within organizational leadership theory reinforce this paradigm. POS, defined as the extent to which employees believe their organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being, has been shown to correlate with increased commitment and trust (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Similarly, P-O fit and person-job fit refer to the congruence between an individual's values and those of the organization, which research consistently links to higher job satisfaction, employee engagement, and long-term retention (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). These frameworks provide a theoretical foundation for examining Paul's leadership in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, where relational integrity, ethical conduct, and emotional investment are central to his leadership ethos. As this study will show, Paul's model anticipates and enriches these contemporary concepts, demonstrating how a Christ-centered approach to leadership fosters commitment, belonging, and holistic well-being in the organizational life of the church.

Exegetical Methodology

This study employs a historically grounded, socio-rhetorical exegetical method, combining the tools of historical-grammatical analysis with insights from socio-rhetorical criticism as outlined by Robbins (1996). The goal is to explore how Paul's leadership model in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 conveys and embodies theological and organizational significance within its first-century context and contemporary leadership discourse.

The historical-grammatical approach provides the foundation for lexical and syntactical study, particularly in examining the semantic range and function of terms such as ἤπιοι (*ēpioi*, gentle), ψυχάς (*psychas*, lives), and the triadic participles παρακαλοῦντες (*parakalountes*, exhorting), παραμυθούμενοι (*paramythoumenoi*, encouraging), and μαρτυρόμενοι (*martyromenoi*, imploring) (Danker et al., 2000). This method emphasizes authorial intent and situational context, helping frame Paul's pastoral tone and rhetorical strategy.

Socio-rhetorical criticism, as developed by Robbins (1996), supplements this base by exploring the inner texture (i.e., repetition, progression, and argumentative movement), intertexture (i.e., allusions to other texts and traditions), and cultural texture (i.e., how the language evokes and subverts Greco-Roman social expectations). For example, Paul's maternal and paternal metaphors (vv. 7, 11–12) challenge prevailing Roman

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ideals of public masculinity and authoritative dominance, reframing leadership through a lens of nurturing service and covenantal loyalty (Malherbe, 2000; Witherington, 2006). This countercultural posture is further heightened when set against patron-client expectations, wherein spiritual leaders often received honor in exchange for benefits. Paul resists this convention by offering his very life (v. 8), not extracting status, thereby reorienting the leadership paradigm toward sacrificial presence. Contemporary studies validate that servant leadership behaviors, particularly empathy, stewardship, and empowerment, enhance POS. Aruoren and Erhuen (2023) demonstrated this effect in a public sector sample, noting that servant leadership produced measurable gains in employee trust and POS.

While socio-rhetorical criticism provides a robust framework for examining the multiple textures of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, it is not without scholarly critique. Kernaghan (2008) cautions that overemphasis on rhetorical structures can inadvertently impose Greco-Roman categories onto Pauline letters, potentially obscuring the Spirit-led spontaneity and pastoral immediacy inherent in the text. This study mitigates such risk by prioritizing contextual fidelity, anchoring interpretation in the historical, cultural, and theological realities of the Thessalonian church, while maintaining sensitivity to the pastoral and missionary intent of the letter. The analysis integrates rhetorical insights as one lens among several, balanced with theological exegesis, canonical intertextuality, and Pentecostal hermeneutics that recognize the Holy Spirit's role in both the inspiration and contemporary application of Scripture. This integrative approach safeguards against reducing Paul's leadership model to an abstract rhetorical construct, ensuring it remains a living paradigm for ministry formation and organizational leadership today.

Intertextually, this study also engages canonical echoes from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels to demonstrate continuity between Paul's servant leadership and broader biblical patterns. Paul's language of exhortation and self-giving resonates with the shepherd motifs of Ezekiel 34 and with Jesus's description of the Good Shepherd in John 10, leaders who protect, nurture, and remain among their people. This thematic resonance reinforces Paul's imitation of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:6) not only in message but in method.

Theologically, Paul's leadership ethic embodies an incarnational model, one that mirrors the kenotic movement of Christ described in Philippians 2:5–11 and the embodied proclamation of the Word in John 1:14. As Fee (2009) argues, Philippians 2:5–11 presents not only a Christological hymn, but a theological template for leadership shaped by downward mobility, self-emptying love, and voluntary servanthood. Paul's call to "have this attitude in yourselves" (Philippians 2:5, NASB) is both exhortational

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and paradigmatic, providing a Christocentric framework for understanding leadership as a sacrifice rather than a pursuit of status. Thus, Paul's self-description in 1 Thessalonians 2 reflects not an isolated rhetorical posture but a consistent theological ethic rooted in his vision of the cruciform Messiah (Fee, 2009). In this light, servant leadership becomes a mode of theological expression—Christ made visible in the daily lives of leaders who walk "holy, righteous, and blameless" before others (1 Thessalonians 2:10, NASB).

This multi-textured exegetical approach allows for a layered reading of the passage, one that remains faithful to the text's original meaning while illuminating its relevance for contemporary organizational leadership. It also strengthens the alignment between biblical theology and empirical leadership constructs such as POS, affective commitment, and P-O fit, as explored in subsequent sections.

Exegetical Analysis of 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12

The Apostle Paul's self-description in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 forms a rich case study in Christ-centered leadership that integrates theological conviction, moral character, and relational investment. Written to a newly formed and persecuted church, this passage offers a unique window into Paul's pastoral ethos and apostolic praxis. Rather than asserting positional dominance, Paul roots his leadership in relational nearness, rhetorical sincerity, and sacrificial self-disclosure. His method of engagement invites the Thessalonians not simply into obedience, but into imitation, identity formation, and spiritual maturity.

A rhythm of rhetorical contrast and affirmation marks the inner texture of the passage. Paul repeatedly uses the phrase "you know" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11) to invoke shared memory and testimony, drawing the readers into a communal narrative of credibility. He frames his leadership using contrastive rhetoric, "not with error or impurity" (v. 3), "not as pleasing men" (v. 4), "not with flattering speech" (v. 5), "nor seeking glory" (v. 6), culminating in the positive declaration, "But we proved to be gentle among you" (v. 7). This rhetorical movement intensifies in verses 11–12 through a triadic participle sequence: παρακαλοῦντες (*parakalountes*, exhorting), παραμυθούμενοι (*paramythoumenoi*, comforting), and μαρτυρόμενοι (*martyromenoi*, imploring). The sequence functions both as an emotional crescendo and a leadership map, guiding followers not only by precept but by presence.

Lexically, verse 7 anchors the relational tone with the term ἤπιοι (ēpioi), meaning gentle. Some manuscripts read νήπιοι (*nēpioi*, infants), which, though textually disputed, reveals the humility and vulnerability Paul was willing to associate with. Whether as a gentle caregiver or an infant among them, the image subverts Greco-

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Roman models of leadership, which are based on dominance, honor, and rhetorical display, particularly as constructed within the hierarchies of the household codes that governed public and private behavior in the Roman world (Osiek & Balch, 1997). Paul's choice of ψυχάς (psychas, lives) in verse 8 reinforces this subversion. He did not merely share instruction, but his very being, evoking the Hebrew term *nephesh* and aligning with the Jewish view of leadership as covenantal and whole-person oriented.

The intertexture of this passage draws on both Old Testament and gospel imagery. Paul's parental metaphors recall the shepherd-leader model of Ezekiel 34, where leaders are rebuked for exploiting rather than nurturing the flock. In contrast, Paul offers himself as a mother nursing her child (v. 7) and a father guiding with encouragement and integrity (vv. 11–12). These familial images connect deeply with Jesus's leadership model in John 10, where the Good Shepherd "lays down His life for the sheep." Thus, Paul's leadership becomes an imitation not only of Christ's teachings, but of His incarnational mode of ministry, embodied presence, suffering love, and relational nearness.

The cultural texture reveals how Paul's approach would have challenged prevailing expectations of leadership in the first-century Greco-Roman world. In that context, public figures were often evaluated by their rhetorical prowess, patronage status, and accumulation of honor. Leaders were expected to receive honor in exchange for benefits, a pattern Paul explicitly rejects in verses 5–6. His refusal to flatter, deceive, or gain glory confronts these norms head-on. As Malherbe (2000) and Witherington (2006) argue Paul intentionally distances himself from the traveling rhetoricians and religious peddlers common in the Roman provinces. Instead, he models a leadership that prioritizes spiritual integrity over social capital.

Verses 10–12 bring the analysis full circle. Paul appeals to the Thessalonians' firsthand experience of his "devout and upright and blameless" conduct (v. 10), which serves not merely as a personal defense but also as a theological strategy. His moral consistency is the basis for his spiritual authority, not his title or position. The phrase "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you" (v. 12) echoes covenantal language, casting leadership as vocational rather than positional, being called by God and confirmed through shared witness.

Taken together, these textures demonstrate that Paul's leadership was both relational and rhetorical, ethical and theological, emotionally tender and spiritually formative. He cultivated trust not through status or strategy but through shared life, personal vulnerability, and consistent holiness. His leadership anticipated the very conditions that contemporary organizational theory identifies as vital to flourishing: psychological

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safety (Edmondson, 1999), organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), and value congruence (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). What Paul models in Thessalonica is not simply pastoral affection; it is a Spirit-led form of organizational leadership, grounded in Scripture and designed for transformation.

Integration with Organizational Leadership Constructs

Paul's leadership in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 offers more than a historical model; it anticipates and enriches contemporary organizational leadership frameworks in profound and practical ways. His apostolic ethos, grounded in integrity, emotional presence, and spiritual intentionality, aligns closely with three widely studied constructs in organizational research: POS, affective organizational commitment, and P-O fit. However, Paul's contribution is not merely analogous; it deepens and reframes these constructs within a biblically rooted understanding of human flourishing.

POS refers to the extent to which employees believe their organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Paul's declaration that he shared "not only the gospel of God but also our own lives" (2:8) exemplifies this principle not in policy but in personhood. His willingness to emotionally and spiritually invest in the Thessalonian believers reflects a leader committed to the flourishing of the whole person, not merely their productivity or compliance. This depth of care, expressed through presence, affection, and moral example, cultivates an atmosphere of psychological safety and trust (Edmondson, 1999), both of which are critical to long-term organizational health. This affective orientation resonates with current findings linking POS to commitment. Recent empirical findings confirm this linkage in organizational settings. Pimenta et al. (2023) found that socially responsible HRM practices promote work engagement through a sequential mediation effect: first by increasing POS, which then heightens affective commitment, even during instability or organizational change. This finding validates Paul's leadership emphasis on relational investment and sacrifice (1 Thessalonians 2:8), showing that care and authenticity yield absolute relational loyalty and dedication.

Paul's choice of the adjective ἤπιοι (ēpioi, gentle) in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 conveys a nuanced picture of leadership marked by tenderness and restraint rather than dominance. As the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* notes, the term carries connotations of mildness and a disposition that avoids harshness, especially in contexts of authority. In Greco-Roman society, public leadership often emphasized strength through assertiveness and control; Paul's use of ēpioi subverts that norm, presenting a countercultural model of influence grounded in relational trust rather than coercion. This gentleness functions not as weakness but as disciplined strength,

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leadership that is self-governed for the sake of another's flourishing. Likewise, his use of ψυχάς (*psychas*, souls or lives) in verse 8 deepens his commitment. The lexicon underscores that *psychē* encompasses the entirety of oneself —emotions, will, and vitality—not merely biological life. By declaring that he was pleased to share not only the gospel but also his psychas, Paul frames leadership as a whole-life investment. This imagery aligns with the kenotic pattern of Christ's own ministry (Philippians 2:5–8, NASB), in which self-giving love is the essence of authority. Together, ēpioi and psychas articulate a leadership posture where relational vulnerability and sacrificial engagement are inseparable from the exercise of influence, offering a biblically grounded corrective to models that prize efficiency or status over embodied presence.

Within a cultural-texture framework, this would have radically challenged Roman models of patronage, which were transactional and hierarchical. Paul reverses this dynamic, offering himself freely without seeking honor (v. 6) and refusing to manipulate (v. 5). His support is not earned by loyalty but extended from covenantal love, a distinctly Christian form of POS that arises not from institutional mandate but incarnational mission.

Affective organizational commitment, described by Meyer and Allen (1991) as the emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in an organization, is likewise modeled in Paul's leadership. His consistent moral conduct, as being "holy and righteous and blameless" (v. 10), and fatherly engagement (v. 11) produce a shared memory and moral solidarity between him and the Thessalonian believers. This bond, forged in tribulation and tested by time, reveals that commitment in Paul's context is not merely emotional warmth, but covenantal fidelity. Recent scholarship provides robust empirical support for the relational and affective nature of commitment modeled by Paul. Åkerlund (2017) found that servant leadership attributes, such as empowerment, authenticity, and stewardship, significantly predict affective and normative commitment to supervisors, accounting for up to 47% of the variance in commitment within the sample. These results affirm that Paul's exhortative style, centered in relational trust, mutual respect, and ethical consistency, translates into measurable organizational outcomes. Moreover, Allen and Meyer's (1996) construct validation study underscores that affective commitment emerges not merely from shared values but also from emotional attachment to leaders perceived as trustworthy and supportive. In ministry contexts, such findings strengthen the case for incarnational leadership models that emphasize presence, patience, and participatory care.

In addition, Fauzan and Sari (2024) contribute to the broader landscape of commitment studies through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of leadership scholarship from 1990 to 2023. Their findings reveal that transformational and authentic leadership

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theories have become dominant antecedents of organizational commitment, while servant leadership, though present, remains underrepresented in global research streams. This gap underscores the importance of integrating scriptural models, such as Paul's, into contemporary discourse, particularly in transnational ministry contexts where virtual teams, cultural diversity, and digital communication tools are reshaping leadership dynamics. Their call for future research on digital-era adaptations reinforces the need to revisit servant leadership through new modalities—an imperative for cross-border gospel teams working across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, who must foster commitment despite distance and risk.

The Apostle Paul's leadership establishes a relational covenant rooted in truth and trust, which Seligman (2011) identifies as a key component of personal well-being and Cameron (2012) considers foundational for organizational flourishing.

Through intertexture, Paul's affective leadership posture echoes Old Testament covenantal patterns where God's relational faithfulness fosters obedience (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:9). Likewise, Jesus's model of discipleship in the Gospels, where He "calls" followers to Himself before commissioning them, establishes the same order: belonging precedes responsibility. Paul follows suit, drawing believers into a gospel community where relational loyalty is shaped by shared purpose rather than enforced obligation.

This countercultural model of servant leadership finds a strong rhetorical parallel in the Lukan tradition. Etukumana (2024), in a socio-rhetorical study of Luke 22:23–27, argues that Jesus's instruction on servant leadership functions as subversive rhetoric within an honor-shame culture. By equating greatness with servanthood and rejecting hierarchical privilege, Jesus reframes communal leadership in terms of solidarity and self-giving. Paul's own leadership posture, particularly in 1 Thessalonians 2, echoes this Lukan motif, demonstrating that early Christian leadership was consistently formed around relational inversion and moral persuasion rather than status or control. Integrating Etukumana's findings enriches the cultural texture analysis of Paul's letter by showing how apostolic leadership both draws from and reinforces a broader canonical ethos that displaces worldly power structures.

P-O fit is a construct concerned with the alignment between an individual's values and the organizational culture (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Paul demonstrates this principle through cultural formation, not cultural accommodation. His use of exhortation, encouragement, and imploring (v. 11) is not coercive but formative, designed to shape the community into a people who "walk in a manner worthy of God" (v. 12). In doing so, he articulates not only a set of values but a lived culture into which others are

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invited and empowered to belong. P-O fit, in this light, becomes more than compatibility; it becomes discipleship. Recent research by Saeed et al. (2025) confirms that P-O fit significantly increases both job satisfaction and organizational commitment, reinforcing the value of shared beliefs and cultural alignment in spiritual organizations.

Paul's servant leadership fosters a spiritual ecology that enables followers to internalize organizational values through imitation (1 Thessalonians 1:6, NASB) and relational experiences. He embodies what he proclaims, thereby establishing the organization's ethical atmosphere. In contemporary terms, this is not only a cultural alignment strategy but a leadership theology of incarnation, values enfleshed, not just stated.

Together, these constructs —POS, affective commitment, and P-O fit —map remarkably well onto Paul's leadership practice, but they also find their fullest expression when rooted in Christ-centered anthropology and ecclesiology. Paul's leadership, mediated through kenosis and integrity, challenges reductionist paradigms that define leadership in terms of charisma, control, or outcomes. Instead, he offers a relationally immersive, morally credible, and spiritually anchored vision that nurtures flourishing within gospel-shaped communities. Recent findings continue to validate the relevance of servant leadership in organizational contexts. For example, Choudhary et al. (2025) demonstrated that servant leadership significantly improves team engagement, enhances value congruence, and strengthens long-term commitment, further substantiating Paul's leadership example in contemporary organizational research, especially regarding the strengthening of team commitment and value alignment, which are core elements of P-O fit.

Implications for Christian Leaders and Organizations

The leadership model articulated by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 carries enduring and urgent implications for Christian leaders who seek to cultivate organizational cultures of spiritual vitality, ethical coherence, and holistic flourishing. In contrast to leadership paradigms that prioritize charisma, authority, or institutional control, Paul's servant leadership invites leaders into a cruciform posture, marked by proximity, moral clarity, and shared life. His apostolic method does not simply commend values; it embodies them.

First, Paul underscores that moral credibility is indispensable for spiritual authority. His emphasis on being "holy and righteous and blameless" (v. 10) reminds leaders that character is not an afterthought; it is foundational. In church and mission contexts, where trust is deeply relational and often fragile, the ethical integrity of the leader forms the bedrock for organizational trust and long-term faithfulness. Leaders who embody the gospel —not only in doctrine but also in conduct —nurture environments

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where psychological safety and spiritual authenticity can flourish (Cameron, 2012; Edmondson, 1999).

Second, Paul demonstrates that relational availability is more formative than strategic visibility. His maternal and paternal metaphors (vv. 7, 11) indicate a leadership model that is emotionally present, developmentally engaged, and covenantally invested. He does not manage from a distance but lives among the people, investing his soul (psychas) into the community (v. 8). This incarnational posture mirrors the ministry of Christ, who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14, NASB) and calls leaders to prioritize relational proximity over institutional prominence.

Paul's emphasis on embodied gentleness and self-giving presence extends the theological foundation for Christian leadership practice. Instead of merely describing pastoral posture, Paul calls leaders to cultivate habits of emotional availability, moral steadiness, and vocational humility that shape the community's spiritual ecology. His ministry among the Thessalonians models leadership as a formative presence rather than a performative role, demonstrating that authority in the Christian tradition rests in integrity and shared life. This pattern aligns with the cruciform trajectory of Christ's ministry, where influence flows through self-emptying love and proximity (Philippians 2:5-8, NASB). When leaders adopt this posture, they create organizational environments in which trust, belonging, and transformation can take root. Such a model offers an alternative to efficiency-driven or image-driven forms of leadership, grounding Christian influence in character and covenantal commitment rather than technique.

This has particular significance in high-risk, cross-cultural, or pioneering environments, such as missions and church planting in unreached or spiritually resistant contexts. In such settings, authority is rarely granted by title; it must be earned through presence, suffering, and sacrificial love. Paul's method, characterized by gentleness, vulnerability, and shared suffering, provides a replicable template for contextual leadership that fosters credibility through incarnation, rather than imposition.

This incarnational model of leadership is not only biblical but also validated in recent qualitative studies. Roberts (2025), through interviews with pastoral leaders facing congregational mental health challenges, identifies servant leadership as a formative practice in spiritual care. These leaders emphasized traits such as emotional resilience, patience, and a continuum of presence-oriented ministry as essential for sustaining healthy ministry relationships. Roberts's findings align with Paul's pastoral posture, particularly his use of familial metaphors, and demonstrate that servant leadership fosters resilience, trust, and spiritual flourishing in ministry environments marked by vulnerability and long-term emotional demands. For gospel workers in the MENA

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region, where ministry often occurs in fragile social contexts and amid personal sacrifice, this empirical affirmation strengthens the call for servant leadership grounded in presence and care.

Third, Paul's example calls for intentional cultural formation within faith-based organizations. His repeated exhortations, ethical modeling, and relational commitment form not merely a set of policies, but a lived culture. He shapes an environment in which values are not only taught but transferred through imitation, embodiment, and shared mission. In modern organizational terms, this is referred to as strategic culture-building. In theological terms, it is discipleship through leadership. Leaders must attend to the subtle formation of language, rituals, and expectations that either reinforce or contradict the gospel message. Culture will form, either by design or by drift, through Paul's models of design.

Ultimately, Paul's leadership suggests that flourishing is not solely an outcome of effective systems, but rather of spiritual communion. His goal is not compliance, but transformation, "so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you" (v. 12). This reorients Christian leadership around vocation and spiritual direction. Organizations become communities of calling, not factories of output. Leaders become shepherds and stewards of that calling, not simply vision-casters or systems designers.

For contemporary Christian leaders, especially those navigating the complexities of multi-ethnic, multi-generational, and transnational ministry contexts, Paul offers a theologically robust and practically transferable framework. It is a leadership of kenosis, not conquest; of presence, not platform; of moral gravity, not managerial gloss. When leaders embody the gospel they preach, they invite others into a flourishing that is both organizationally resilient and spiritually redemptive.

Future research might explore how leaders who embody Pauline servant leadership affect organizational trust, retention, and well-being across diverse cultural settings. Qualitative methods, such as ethnographic case studies or interviews within church planting networks, may provide insight into how these constructs manifest in real-time ministry contexts.

To extend the theoretical insights of this study, future research could employ an empirical design to examine the relationship between POS, affective organizational commitment, and flourishing in church planting networks across the MENA region. A mixed-methods approach would allow for both quantitative validation and qualitative depth. Empirical studies in ecclesial settings already possess a proven foundation. For example, Åkerlund (2017) found that POS significantly predicts affective commitment among church volunteers, reinforcing the relevance and feasibility of POS measures in

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faith-based contexts. Quantitative measures would capture the statistical strength of relationships between leadership practices and follower outcomes, while qualitative interviews or ethnographic case studies could reveal contextual nuances, such as the impact of honor-shame dynamics or persecution pressures on organizational trust. This integrative methodology would not only test the applicability of Pauline servant leadership principles in diverse ministry settings but also generate actionable insights for training and sustaining leaders in high-risk environments.

Conclusion

The leadership portrait that emerges from 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12 presents a biblically grounded, theologically rich, and organizationally relevant framework for cultivating human flourishing through Christ-centered leadership. Paul's model, marked by moral integrity, emotional availability, covenantal self-giving, and cultural intentionality, resonates with and expands upon key constructs in contemporary leadership theory, including POS, affective organizational commitment, and P-O fit.

Rather than imposing authority, Paul evokes trust through a kenotic leadership posture: "gentle among you," "sharing our own lives," and exhorting "as a father would his children." His leadership is not managerial but incarnational, not merely positional but pastoral. This example reframes flourishing not as organizational output, but as vocational alignment, spiritual maturity, and relational cohesion within a gospel-formed community. His servant leadership embodies the character of Christ and provides a transferable model for leaders who aim to foster resilience, belonging, and purpose within faith-based organizations.

Furthermore, Paul's leadership presents a compelling case study for integrating Scripture and organizational science. His relational model anticipates the conditions modern researchers now identify as prerequisites for organizational flourishing: psychological safety, ethical leadership, and value congruence. However, his example transcends theory by rooting leadership identity in theological vocation: calling, not career; embodiment, not performance.

As Christian leaders navigate the shifting landscapes of globalization, secularization, and organizational complexity, Paul's leadership offers an anchoring vision: to lead with holiness and humility, to serve with presence and purpose, and to cultivate cultures of belonging and transformation in Christ. His model challenges both ecclesial and academic communities to reconsider the roots and fruits of leadership through a scriptural lens of servant-hearted formation.

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Despite these strengths, further empirical and theological inquiry is warranted. Specifically, a gap remains in research exploring how biblically grounded servant leadership practices, particularly those shaped by Pauline models, impact long-term organizational commitment, employee flourishing, and missional effectiveness across cross-cultural and faith-based contexts. Future studies should investigate how such models perform in diverse organizational environments and whether their Christ-centered ethos measurably contributes to flourishing at individual, team, and institutional levels.

Accordingly, this study raises the following guiding research question:
How do biblically grounded servant leadership models, such as Paul's in 1 Thessalonians 2:1–12, influence POS and employee flourishing across cross-cultural, faith-based organizations?

About the Author

Matt Hattabaugh serves as a pastor, church planter, leadership developer, and author based in Beirut, Lebanon. Together with his wife, Julie, he leads GoChurch Beirut and directs Go Middle East (www.go-me.org), a ministry dedicated to multiplying leaders and planting Christ-centered churches across the MENA region. In addition, he serves as the national director for RHEMA Bible Training College in Lebanon and assists the director for RHEMA in the Middle East and North Africa.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Matt Hattabaugh [ORCID iD: 0009-0007-9063-0098], Go Middle East, INC, P.O. Box 3134, Broken Arrow, OK 74013. PH: 405-633-1256. Email: matt@hattabaugh.family or matth24@mail.regent.edu

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
REGENT UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & LEADERSHIP

Value-Creating Organizational Leadership Theory: A Collaborative Initiative for Human Resource Management Retention

Gladys M. Monroe Nelson
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Organizational leadership principles applied in the hiring process through human resource management (HRM) by human resource professionals (HRP) in a hierarchical education system suggest the identification of behavioral leadership attributes (BLA). These applied principles identified in potential candidates, taught through mentorship, are an integral component of the learning process due to their implied transference of BLA from teacher to student within the mentorship context (e.g., implicit leadership theory) (Bellido-Garcia et al., 2022; Kelley & Wenzel, 2019; Monroe, 2025; Parrish, 2024; Rinaldi, 2020). For the student to flourish within the educational process and demonstrate BLA as a qualified candidate for employment, becoming trained and motivated to contribute to organizational citizenry, the organization's leadership and workplace environment must be conducive to employing value-creating organizational leadership theory (VCOLT) concepts. These concepts integrate BLA (e.g., elements), transformational leadership theory (TLT), charismatic leadership theory (CLT) and strategic management theory (SMT) as a collaborative leadership model (CLM) that promotes a moral structure for organizational psychological empowerment at all levels of the organization's hierarchical citizenry (Fry et al., 2005; Ishaq et al., 2023; Kollenscher et al., 2018). A qualitative exploratory, descriptive single case study and quantitative linear regression and t-test analysis studies demonstrated the importance of "person-job fit (PJF), person-organization fit (POF), and organizational commitment (OC)" crucial to employee retention (Parrish, 2024; Tufail & Jehahgir, 2018, pp. 311, 319; Yin, 2018).

Keywords: job-satisfaction, person-job fit, person-organization fit, strategic, retention

The purpose of this presentation is to provide a compilation of peer-reviewed articles and dissertations that substantiate the importance of the value-creating organizational leadership theory (VCOLT) concept as a strategic approach for identifying potential leaders in the human resource management (HRM) hiring process. These qualified

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leader candidates, identified in the research, can serve as valuable human resource examples, having experienced the mutual responsibility of the hiring process between employees and management, fostering an agreement to engage in organizational citizenship while achieving the set goals and objectives implemented by their organization's management team.

According to Hasan et al. (2021), the work-life balance ratio between employee and management workplace commitments, across cultural, age, educational, and current employee experience, hinges on job satisfaction (JS) and effective OC (Mustata & Niculescu, 2016). Furthermore, Sulistiowati et al. (2018) surveyed academic populations of lecturers in public and private higher education to explore distinct group differences in PJF and employee engagement from an HRM perspective. Tufail and Jehahgir (2018) investigated the correlation between PJF and POF attributes and their potential effect on teachers' job satisfaction, whether employed in the private or public educational system. The findings suggested that implementing VCOLT practices in HR recruitment could lead to improved employee retention.

Kollenscher et al. (2018) suggested that VCOLT, which integrates TLT, CLT, and SMT, presents a "unified model of prevalent approaches to leadership" (p. 19). TLT proposes that leaders seek to empower their followers by focusing on a higher level of purpose, motivated by morality and a positive, inspirational vision to meet their needs (Burns, 1978; Geiger & Peck, 2016; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Behavior leadership attributes (BLA) studies provided insight into the effective leadership dynamics of successful managers, aiming to determine if specific characteristics were generalizable and "documented performance to other follower groups by their tasks and environments" (Konopaske et al., 2018, p. 408). Leaders of organizations that adopt the view that CLT is "risky, transitory, rare, and emotional" could demonstrate sound decision-making by empowering their followers with the necessary skills, expertise, and mentorship guidance, which may enhance effective productivity by taking calculated opportunities (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). "Strategic Management Approach, which is macro leadership theories" (Kollenscher et al., 2018, p. 22) employs a theoretical approach to "organizational behavior" (Hallo & Nguyen, 2022, p. 2) holistically, rather than focusing on individual or team members, which could minimize potential inherent bias in the hiring process (Monroe, 2025).

A Five-Stream Perspective: HRM Employee Retention

The hiring selection process implemented by HRM in response to the organization's request for personnel, at all levels, acknowledges that the fulfillment of specific job responsibilities is essential to the organization's effectiveness through the decision-making process to hire the best candidate to fit the organization's job description by enhancing the collaborative work initiative within the organization's citizenry. The

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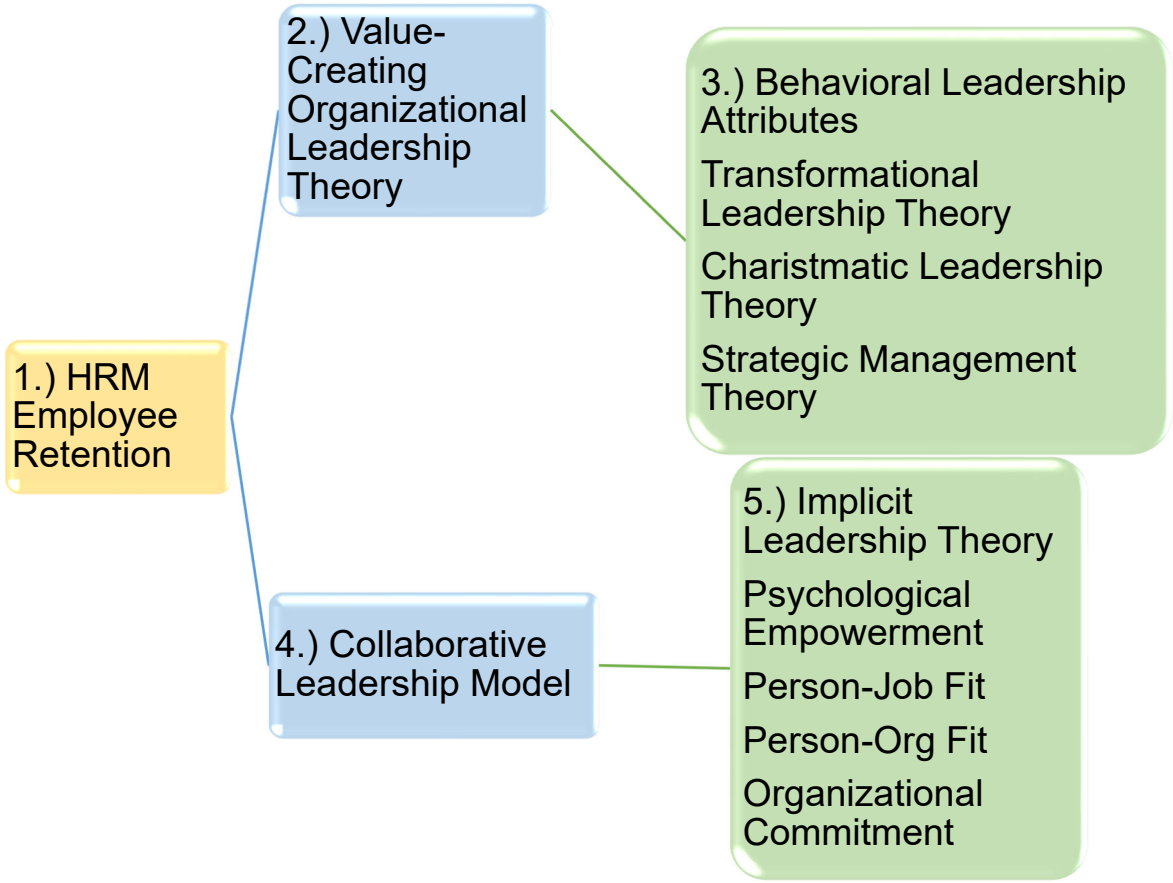
hiring manager's confidence in the human resource professional's (HRP) skill and expertise in the hiring decision-making process is crucial to a CLM that incorporates the psychological empowerment, PJF, POF, and OC in the training, development, and retention of the hired personnel selected. Kollenscher et al.'s (2018) research suggested that the implementation of VCOLT is a comprehensive, effective, and strategic approach to leadership management for achieving sustainable organizational performance.

Figure 1: HRM Employee Retention: A Five-Stream Perspective



Note. The prevailing position as a VCOLT framework suggests the integration of vision, influence, and mentorship from a meso, micro, and macro perspective, which involves the flexibility in the manager's approach to leading the workforce in self-efficacy, innovation, adaptation, and the balance of HRM, identifying BLA, fostering organizational citizenry, training and development programs, and retention through efficient decision-making in the hiring process (Kollenscher et al., 2018; Offermann et al., 1994; Offermann & Coats, 2018; Winner, 2008; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004).

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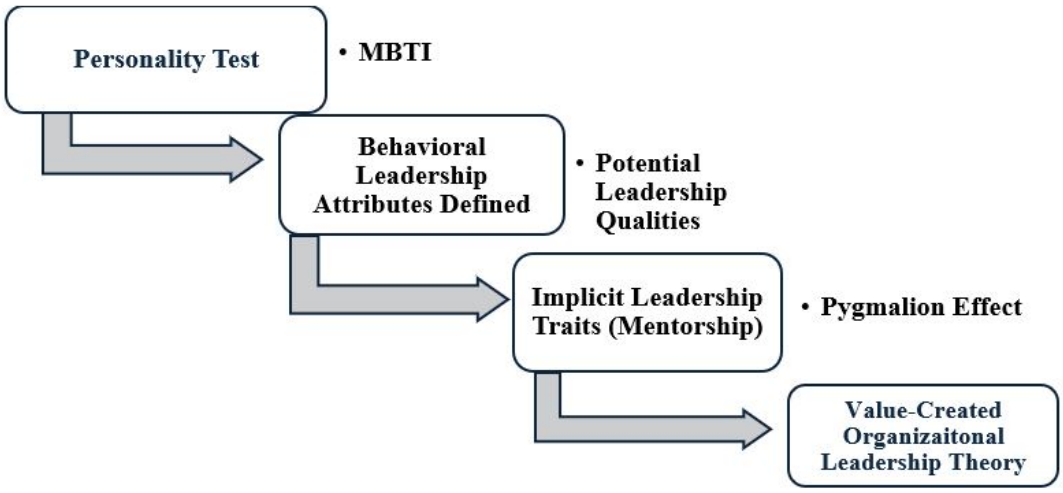
Value-Creating Organizational Leadership Theory (VCOLT)

As managers strategically determine the organizational needs of their departments, the framework is created from a transformational (e.g., micro/influence), strategic management (e.g., macro/vision), and structuring (e.g., meso/operations, product development, customer-centered marketing) viewpoint, which, in this context, refers to the collaboration of the leader-follower dynamic, exemplifying VCOLT attributes (Kollenscher et al., 2018). Therefore, Kollenscher et al. (2018) asserted that "behavioral patterns (BLA), infrastructure and motivation are core processes" in determining the implementation of the VCOLT cycle perspective (p. 29). Value-based mentorship in an organization's operational design has been noted in the hiring process through the use of personality test indicators, as emphasized by HRM in the BLA (Monroe, 2025). The sequence in identifying potential leadership qualifications hinges on the HRP identification of BLA, using the big five test modules (e.g., Myers-BriggsType Indicator – MBTI), questionnaires, recognizing that mentorship for leaders within their organization, in concert with employee training and development initiatives, could frame the workplace culture as a means of personal empowerment for the employee to become the best fit for their position within the organization (Monroe, 2025). Moreover, job satisfaction and OC to the well-being of an employee could lead to employee retention as valued citizens in the work environment (Ansong et al., 2024; Mustata & Niculescu, 2016; Sulistiowati et al., 2018; Tufail & Jehahgir, 2018; Winston, 2019).

Figure 2: Progression of Identifying in MBTI for Potential Leadership Qualifications Using ILT and VCOLT



Note. Compilation of conducted research – MBTI (Judge et al., 2002), CVF (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001; Vilkinas et al., 2020), Causal Relationships (Yukl & Gardner, 2020), ILT (Offermann & Coats, 2018), and VCLOT (Kollenscher et al., 2018; Judge et al., 2002).

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Behavioral Leadership Attributes (BLA)

The behavioral attributes of leaders who exemplify effective decision-making demonstrate task- or people-oriented motivation in performing their job responsibilities. Yukl and Gardner (2020) state that specificity in the leader's inclination to "plan, clarify, monitor, problem-solve, or focus productivity" (p. 13) could be regulated to be task- or people-driven in accomplishing personal or organizational goals and objectives from a "holistic understanding" in leadership decision-making (Hallo & Nguyen, 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, the collaborative efforts between leaders and followers, based on long-term goals and intrinsic needs, enable the display of a cohesive mentorship interaction that extrinsically motivates and challenges followers, leading to a mutual communicative interaction that enhances potential workplace productivity (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Rinaldi, 2020).

Therefore, Yukl and Gardner's (2020) causal relationship diagram represents the leader's traits and skills that have attributes that can influence organizational processes. Followers may emulate and model the behavioral attributes asserted by their leaders by adapting to situational variables. This process could produce performance outcomes that reflect the guidance and example set by the leader.

Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT)

The leadership which positively influences, inspires, and motivates followers to emulate their behaviors, with a commitment to making effective managerial decisions that direct, propel, and structure the organizational culture to achieve excellence, is the purpose of the VCOLT model (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). According to Judge and Piccolo (2004), the dimensions of transformational leadership exemplified are "charisma, inspired motivation, idealized influence, and intellectual incentives" to enhance productivity and workplace camaraderie (Geiger & Peck, 2016; Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 755).

Charismatic Leadership Theory (CMT)

The leader's ability to communicate a vision to their followers that resonates and empowers them to model leadership behaviors, engage in productivity under the leader's guidance, and achieve attainable success is a key aspect of the persuasive influence of charismatic leaders (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Value-centered moral conviction is the pivotal aspect of the leadership principles portrayed in the focus of this research. However, charismatic persuasion is contingent upon authentic personal values, the leader's beliefs and values, and the follower's actions, which must align with these values to contribute to the organizational citizenry when modeling their leader's behavioral attributes (Dean & Huizinga, 2022; Hewlin et al., 2017; Winston, 2019). The

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principles of morality in the Judeo-Christian belief system recognize the outward distinguishable behavior qualities of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" as a premise for relational interactions (Dean & Huizinga, 2022; Ishaq et al., 2023; Monroe, 2024; *New King James Version*, 1982/1984, Galatians 5:22–23; Toulassi, 2022).

Strategic Management Theory (SMT)

SMT focuses on the organizational vision, supervision of the workforce, control to gauge operational effectiveness, planning, analysis, and the implementation of strategic goal setting to present organizational stability in the marketplace (Kollenscher et al., 2018). Hou and Li (2024) acknowledged the complexity of SMT because of the multidisciplinary fields of diverse thought; therefore, they chose a triangulation model to identify the SMT framework in literature through the lens of "ontology linking phenomenology to rhetoric" as their theoretical prototype to define its resilience and adaptability for sustainable endurance (p. 3762). Furthermore, SMT is defined by the formulation of strategic, creative ways to enhance operational productivity by demonstrating the value of an organization's product or service to its customers and stakeholders in the marketplace as a strategic competitive edge (Amason, 2011; Ployhart & Weekley, 2017).

Collaborative Leadership Model (CLM)

The CLM suggests the amalgamation of generalizable attributes from (a) implicit leadership theory (ILT), (b) the psychological empowerment of followers, (c) the characteristic of the PJF concept, (d) the characteristic of the POF concept, and (e) the OC to the human resource workforce to train, develop, promote, and retain employees who contribute to the organization's vision, mission, goals, objectives, and strategy for longevity in the marketplace as an integral component to employee hiring and retention.

Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT)

Mentorship within the organizational framework translates to a collaborative effort to enhance a follower's ability to gain knowledge, skills, and promote camaraderie within the organizational environment. Organizational citizenship develops in the early stages of an employee's life through the educational system, creating an environment that fosters the collaborative influence between the principal, teacher, and student in the learning process (e.g., TeachLive™) (Bellido-Garcia et al., 2022; Kelley & Wenzel, 2019; Monroe, 2025).

Offermann et al. (1994) acknowledged the importance of understanding the workplace environment that fosters the ILT concept, where eight distinctive factors were found

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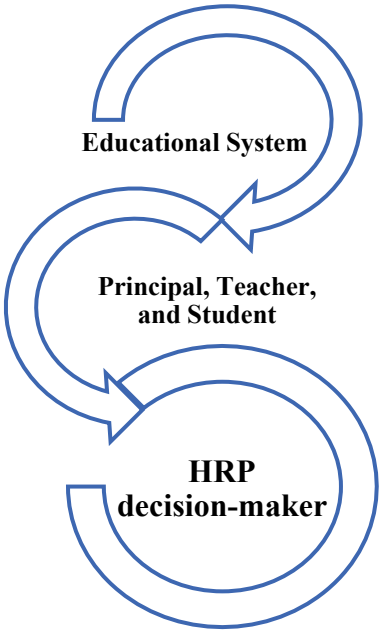
using mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative research to test instruments to determine the underlying framework of ILT and its resulting factors of whether the hypothetical scenarios have validity, reliability, and generalizability. Further research conducted by Offermann and Coats (2018), using a longitudinal method over 20 years, confirmed that the ILT factors are "intelligence, sensitivity, dedication, strength, masculinity, charisma and tyranny" (p. 513).

Figure 3: The Educational System's Influence on the HRP's Hiring Process



Note. Monroe, 2025, p. 21.

Psychological Empowerment

Leaders within organizations who promote collaboration between leadership and their followers' efforts based on "meaning, self-efficacy, and self-determination" enable them to influence the operational aspects of an organization and empower the workforce culture to reach its highest potential (Hernon & Rossiter, 2006; Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 97). According to Hernon and Rossiter (2006), BLA at every level of an organization's hierarchy encourages the development of leaders, which in turn will "influence the effectiveness" of their workforce (p. 260). Furthermore, the psychological confidence exemplified in the mutual exchange of the organization's (a) vision, (b) camaraderie amongst their peers, (c) adaptability, (d) optimism, (e) self-awareness, (f) empathy, and (g) employee interest in training and development lends to the potential existence of "self-management and emotional intelligence" exemplified in leadership decision-making through leadership mentoring the workforce (e.g., TLT) (Hernon & Rossiter, 2006, p. 260).

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Person-Job Fit (PJF)

Ishaq et al. (2023) investigated the impact of leadership's moral competence within an organization's citizenry and its effect on an employee's "task performance, and behaviors" within the context of the person being fit for the job and the organizational culture (p. 14). The acknowledgement of psychological empowerment attributes in employees within the study showed optimistic performance, which enhanced the affirmation of PJF and POF, influencing the overall results. According to Ishaq et al. (2023), previous studies have suggested that additional behavioral attributes, such as retention, commitment, and performance, are affected by POF behaviors (e.g., well-being, motivation, citizenship, retention).

However, the primary focus of the study was on the moral competence of organizational leadership's effect on the psychological empowerment characteristics of followers who possess the ability to achieve effective productivity balanced with personal well-being and organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., POF) (Ishaq et al., 2023).

Person-Organization Fit (POF)

The effectiveness of leadership within an organization is crucial for operational collaboration between leaders and followers to complete tasks and manage personnel effectively. Bloodgood and Morrow (2003) researched the strategy formation process, focusing on how leadership influences an organization's performance in the marketplace by implementing quality strategic choices that govern the workflow of its personnel. Vilkinas and Cartan (2001) recognized through their research that competing values, such as "flexibility-stability and external-internal focus dimensions" (e.g., integrator role), demonstrate managerial effectiveness in their work environment (p. 175).

Ansong et al. (2024) emphasized in their findings that citizenship behavior within an organization is a step beyond the requirements of a job description; therefore, the additional incentive for an employee to adjust to fit into the organizational culture may not be rewarded or recognized by leadership. Organizational citizenship behavior is considered a "social exchange theory behavior" (Ansong et al., 2024, p. 1).

Organizational Commitment (OC)

Hasan et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research regarding the OC within private-sector organizations regarding (a) work-life balance, (b) PJF, (c) job satisfaction, and (d) working conditions, of which 843 responses yielded 77% of the total completed questionnaires. Job satisfaction was the pivotal factor that linked affective OC, PJF, and work-life balance. Within the VCOLT model, the organization's ability to nurture,

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motivate, and structure workforce expectations is crucial (Hasan et al., 2021). If organizations promote leadership and follower collaboration, the results could strengthen the cultural work environment, leading to organizational sustainability and job satisfaction (Jayanthi & Mathews, 2023; Kollenscher et al., 2018).

Employee Retention

According to Jayanthi and Matthew (2023), the camaraderie, recognition, empowerment, and trust exemplified by leadership foster a teamwork environment, promote participatory engagement between the leader and follower, and cultivate loyalty to the organization. An organization's ability to retain employees who have been trained and developed to produce efficient, effective, and quality results within the workplace is a valuable asset to the organization at any level within its hierarchy. Leadership that recognizes and values the contributions made by its followers should be acknowledged, appreciated, and encouraged.

About the Author

Gladys M. Monroe Nelson, PhD, holds a Bachelor of Science (BS), specializing in business administration and finance, from Virginia Union University and a Master of Science in Accounting (MSA), specializing in auditing, from Purdue University Global (Kaplan). She is a graduate of Regent University, having accomplished her pursuit of a doctoral degree in organizational leadership with a focus on ecclesial studies from the School of Business and Leadership. This degree enables her to provide a wealth of knowledge and experience to the academic fields of study and to consult with not-for-profit organizations and corporations on achieving fiscal responsibility and effective HRM through fostering transformational leadership attributes in their hiring policies and procedures.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gladys M. Monroe Nelson, PhD, P.O. Box 25488, Richmond, VA, 23260-5488. Email: gladmon@mail.regent.edu or servicenvson@aol.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Regulating Distress Through the Five Domains of Safety: A Trauma-Informed Model for Modern Leadership

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Trauma is no longer viewed solely as an individual clinical problem; it is increasingly recognized as an organizational reality that shapes behavior, engagement, and performance in the workplace. Employees bring adverse childhood experiences, combat trauma, chronic stress, discrimination, and workplace harm into their professional roles, influencing attention, memory, emotional regulation, and trust. Trauma-informed leadership (TIL) provides a framework for addressing these realities by prioritizing human well-being as a strategic leadership goal (Lloyd, 2024). Within the TIL Impact Framework™, *regulating distress* emerges as a core leadership behavior that enables individuals and teams to function within an optimal "window of tolerance" for stress. This behavior is operationalized through five interdependent domains of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural. This article synthesizes trauma theory, neuroscience, organizational psychology, and leadership studies to articulate why regulating distress is indispensable for modern leadership and how the five domains of safety serve as practical mechanisms for achieving this goal. The paper explores the neurobiological underpinnings of distress, defines each domain of safety, and illustrates their relevance across organizational contexts. It argues that these domains are not peripheral "nice-to-have" concepts but essential leadership capacities that determine whether people can think clearly, build trust, learn, innovate, and flourish in the face of volatility and ongoing stressors. Implications for leadership development and organizational policy are discussed, positioning regulating distress through the five domains of safety as both an ethical mandate and a strategic imperative for sustainable, human-centered leadership.

Keywords: trauma, safety, regulating distress, leadership, organization

Trauma has long been studied in clinical, military, and therapeutic contexts, but its relevance to organizational life has only recently begun to receive sustained attention (Bloom, 2013; Lloyd, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014). Employees bring their full lived histories

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into the workplace, including adverse childhood experiences, combat exposure, intimate partner violence, racial trauma, spiritual abuse, chronic stress, and prior experiences of workplace harm. These histories shape how individuals perceive threat, interpret feedback, respond to authority, manage conflict, and engage with organizational change (Felitti et al., 1998; Herman, 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Traditional leadership models often assume rational actors operating in psychologically neutral environments. However, research on trauma and stress has revealed that these assumptions are often unrealistic. Trauma can dysregulate the nervous system, alter neurobiological pathways, heighten threat sensitivity, decrease cognitive flexibility, and narrow tolerance for ambiguity (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012). In organizational contexts, unrecognized trauma and unregulated distress can manifest as disengagement, irritability, conflict, avoidance, perfectionism, emotional outbursts, or withdrawal—behaviors that are frequently misinterpreted as defiance, incompetence, or lack of commitment rather than as manifestations of dysregulation (Rock, 2008; van der Kolk, 2014).

Trauma-informed leadership (TIL) provides a lens for understanding and responding to these dynamics. Building on SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed principles, the TIL Impact Framework™ integrates empirical leadership research with trauma theory to identify four key attributes (authenticity, emotional intelligence, relational capacity, and resilience) and four core behaviors (understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing) of trauma-informed leaders. Among these behaviors, regulating distress is a central aspect. It involves intentionally shaping the emotional climate of the organization so that individuals and teams can function within an optimal range of arousal, remaining capable of rational thought, relational engagement, and ethical action.

Within the TIL Impact Framework™, regulating distress is grounded in five interdependent domains of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural. These domains correspond to different facets of human security—physiological, emotional, relational, ethical, and identity-based—and together create the conditions necessary for people to think, learn, trust, and grow. When these domains are present, individuals experience reduced amygdala activation, increased prefrontal functioning, and greater capacity for connection and collaboration (Arnsten, 2015; Edmondson, 2019; Herman, 2015).

This article synthesizes two lines of work: (a) a broader theoretical articulation of regulating distress as a TIL behavior, and (b) a detailed exposition of the five domains of safety as mechanisms through which leaders operationalize distress regulation. The goal is to demonstrate that TIL is not merely about awareness but about concrete

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behaviors that foster sustainable safety across these five domains, thereby supporting both human and organizational flourishing.

Trauma, Distress, and the Human Nervous System

Distress arises when perceived demands exceed perceived internal or external resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For individuals with trauma histories, this threshold is often altered. Trauma primes the nervous system to interpret neutral or ambiguous stimuli as potential threats, sensitizing the amygdala and biasing perception toward danger (van der Kolk, 2014). When a threat is perceived—whether physical, emotional, relational, or moral—the following typically occurs:

- The amygdala becomes hyperactive, prioritizing survival.
- The sympathetic nervous system activates fight, flight, or freeze responses (Porges, 2011).
- Prefrontal cortex activity decreases, impairing executive functions such as planning, impulse control, and complex decision making (Arnsten, 2015).
- Working memory and information processing suffer (Schwabe & Wolf, 2010).

In workplaces, these neurobiological cascades may surface as difficulty concentrating, emotional volatility, avoidance of tasks or people, seeming resistance to change, or sudden shutdown during conflict. Leaders who are unaware of trauma may interpret these behaviors as "attitude problems," laziness, or incompetence, rather than as signs of dysregulation. Such misinterpretation often leads to punitive or shaming responses, which further amplify distress and erode trust.

Without safety, employees cannot consistently access the higher order cognitive and relational capacities that organizations rely on for problem solving, creativity, learning, and collaboration (Rock, 2008). Regulating distress, therefore, is not optional; it is foundational. It requires leaders to create conditions that signal safety to the nervous system, thereby downregulating threat responses and allowing executive functioning and relational capacity to be restored. The five domains of safety provide a structured framework for conceptualizing those conditions.

Trauma-Informed Leadership and the Behavior of Regulating Distress

TIL integrates knowledge about trauma with leadership practices that prioritize safety, trust, empowerment, and healing (SAMHSA, 2014). It is not a discrete leadership style but a cross-cutting framework that can enhance and deepen other models such as transformational, servant, authentic, and adaptive leadership.

Within Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework, regulating distress denotes a leader's deliberate efforts to monitor and manage an organization or team's emotional temperature. This

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concept aligns with Heifetz's (1994) idea of a "holding environment" in adaptive leadership, where leaders maintain stress at a tolerable level, allowing individuals to engage with complex issues without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down (p. 102). Trauma-informed leaders extend this notion by explicitly attending to the neurobiological and psychological effects of trauma.

Regulating distress involves both proactive and responsive components. Proactively, leaders cultivate systems, policies, relationships, and communication patterns that promote stability and predictability. Responsively, leaders intervene when distress escalates—by adjusting expectations, pausing nonessential demands, facilitating debriefings after critical incidents, or connecting individuals to appropriate support. In both cases, the leader's own emotional regulation is crucial; a calm, grounded leader can coregulate the team, while a reactive leader can intensify distress.

Theologically or morally oriented leaders may also view regulating distress as an expression of stewardship and compassion. Leadership is then understood not merely as managing tasks, but as caring for the well-being of those entrusted to them—helping them navigate both external and internal storms. Whether framed through organizational psychology, trauma theory, or faith, the conclusion is consistent: leaders who regulate distress make it possible for people to function at their best.

The five domains of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—anchor this behavior in specific, observable practices. Each domain targets a different dimension of perceived threat and, when intentionally cultivated, collectively reduces distress and supports flourishing.

The Five Domains of Safety as Mechanisms of Distress Regulation

Domain 1: Physical Safety

Definition and Relevance

Physical safety refers to the absence of threats to bodily integrity, environmental hazards, or physiological overload. It includes secure facilities, safe equipment, reasonable workloads, predictable schedules, and freedom from harassment or physical harm.

Physical safety aligns with the base of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and is reinforced by neuroscience, which demonstrates that physical threats trigger immediate survival responses (Porges, 2011). When physical danger or chronic bodily strain is present, the brain prioritizes survival, reducing the capacity for higher level thinking and collaboration (van der Kolk, 2014).

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Organizational Manifestations

In organizational settings, threats to physical safety may include the following

- unsafe work environments or inadequate protective equipment
- aggressive or explosive supervisory behavior
- sexual harassment or intimidation
- unpredictable scheduling and chronic overwork leading to exhaustion
- lack of emergency preparedness or crisis protocols
- exposure to environmental hazards, noise, or crowding

These conditions elevate cortisol, wear down the body's stress response systems, and impair executive functioning (McEwen, 2007).

Leadership Implications Leaders regulate distress physically by

- enforcing robust safety and antiharassment policies;
- designing predictable routines, clear procedures, and emergency plans;
- supporting rest, hydration, movement, and realistic workloads; or
- addressing unsafe behavior or environments promptly.

When physical safety is secured, the nervous system receives a crucial "all clear" signal. Employees expend less energy scanning for danger and more on their actual work, increasing cognitive bandwidth and capacity for engagement.

Domain 2: Psychological Safety

Definition and Relevance

Psychological safety is the shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks—such as asking questions, voicing concerns, admitting mistakes, or offering dissent—without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or retribution (Edmondson, 1999).

Trauma often involves psychological betrayal, invalidation, or silencing (Herman, 2015). Individuals with such histories may be susceptible to tone, criticism, or ambiguity and may become hypervigilant to cues of potential humiliation or exclusion.

Theoretical Foundations

Psychological safety has been strongly linked to team learning behaviors, performance, and innovation (Edmondson, 2019). When people anticipate ridicule or punishment, the amygdala interprets interpersonal risk as threat, suppressing analytical reasoning and prompting self-protective behavior (Rock, 2008). For trauma survivors, this effect can be amplified, as criticism or failure may echo earlier experiences of shaming or rejection.

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Leadership Implications

Leaders cultivate psychological safety by

- responding with curiosity rather than judgment,
- normalizing mistakes as part of learning,
- being emotionally predictable and consistent,
- clarifying expectations and reducing unnecessary ambiguity,
- avoiding punitive or shaming responses, or
- following through on commitments to build trust.

When psychological safety is strong, employees are more willing to share ideas, raise concerns, and admit when they are struggling. This sense of safety not only supports individual healing but also enhances organizational adaptability and innovation.

Domain 3: Social Safety

Definition and Relevance

Social safety refers to a felt sense of belonging, inclusion, and connection within a group. It is rooted in relational neuroscience, showing that humans regulate their nervous systems through proximity to other supportive individuals (Siegel, 2012).

Social exclusion activates similar neural pathways to those activated by physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Thus, relational instability, ostracism, or neglect can dramatically increase distress, particularly for individuals whose trauma involved abandonment, relational betrayal, or community loss.

Organizational Threats.

Threats to social safety include the following:

- gossip and triangulation
- cliques and in-groups
- leadership favoritism
- relational neglect from supervisors
- withholding information as social control
- intentional isolation or exclusion from meetings or decisions
- failure to acknowledge contributions

These dynamics undermine trust, fuel insecurity, and erode team cohesion.

Leadership Implications

Leaders foster social safety by

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- demonstrating a consistent, authentic connection with team members;
- building inclusive team norms and rituals that foster a sense of belonging;
- intervening in bullying, gossip, or exclusionary behavior;
- publicly acknowledging contributions and effort; and
- ensuring information flows fairly and transparently.

Social safety enables coregulation: individuals calm one another through supportive interactions, which reduces loneliness and strengthens collective resilience and performance.

Domain 4: Moral Safety

Definition and Relevance

Moral safety refers to the assurance that an individual's ethical values, sense of fairness, and moral integrity will be respected within the organization.

Moral injury—initially identified in military contexts—occurs when individuals perpetrate, witness, or fail to prevent acts that violate their deeply held moral beliefs, or when they experience betrayal by an authority figure (Litz et al., 2009). In organizational settings, moral injury can arise from unethical practices, double standards, or pressure to compromise values, resulting in profound distress, burnout, and disengagement (Dean et al., 2019).

Organizational Threats

Moral threats include the following:

- tolerance of unethical practices
- retaliation against whistleblowers or truth-tellers
- unfair discipline or favoritism
- leaders ignore or minimize harm
- pressure to deceive, mislead, or compromise personal values

Such conditions fracture trust and may lead individuals to emotionally or physically exit the organization.

Leadership Implications

Leaders create moral safety by

- upholding ethical standards consistently, even when costly;
- practicing transparent decision making and explaining rationales;
- addressing injustice and harm promptly and fairly;

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- encouraging principled dissent and protecting those who speak up; and
- demonstrating accountability, including admitting and repairing their own mistakes.

Moral safety restores dignity and anchors the organization in integrity. When employees trust that the organization's actions align with its espoused values, distress associated with ethical conflict is reduced, and commitment increases.

Domain 5: Cultural Safety

Definition and Relevance

Cultural safety ensures that individuals' cultural identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences are respected, valued, and protected. It moves beyond surface-level diversity rhetoric to focus on identity-based well-being and trauma prevention.

The concept arose in healthcare as a response to harms inflicted on Indigenous populations and other marginalized groups by mainstream systems (Ramsden, 1993). It recognizes that racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and cultural erasure are forms of trauma with psychological and physiological consequences (Sue et al., 2007).

Organizational Threats

Threats to cultural safety include the following:

- microaggressions and subtle bias
- tokenism and symbolic rather than substantive inclusion
- dismissing or minimizing cultural or religious needs
- stereotyping or essentializing groups
- unequal access to advancement, resources, or voice
- policies that assume a dominant cultural norm and ignore others
- these harms can trigger identity-based distress, hypervigilance, and withdrawal

Leadership Implications

Leaders promote cultural safety by

- practicing cultural humility and continuous learning,
- seeking feedback from diverse employees on their lived experiences,
- ensuring equitable access to opportunities and decision making,
- responding promptly to identity-based harm or discrimination,
- creating policies and practices that account for diverse cultural realities, and
- supporting individuals' self-definition rather than imposing identity categories.

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Cultural safety affirms identity, reduces identity-based anxiety, and deepens belonging and engagement. For many employees, especially those from historically marginalized communities, this domain is nonnegotiable for establishing trust in leadership and the organization.

Interdependence of the Five Domains

The five domains of safety function as an interconnected system. A breach in one domain often destabilizes others:

- Without physical safety, psychological safety is difficult to sustain.
- Without psychological safety, social safety becomes superficial and fragile.
- Without social safety, cultural safety efforts can feel performative.
- Without moral safety, trust disintegrates across all domains.
- Without cultural safety, belonging fractures and moral and social safety are undermined.

Regulating distress requires simultaneous attention to all five domains of safety. An organization with excellent physical safety protocols but a culture of fear and favoritism will still generate significant distress. Conversely, a warm social climate cannot compensate for chronic ethical violations or unaddressed racism. Leaders must, therefore, approach safety systemically, understanding that each domain reinforces the others.

From a TIL perspective, the five domains serve as diagnostic and design tools. They help leaders identify where distress is being generated and where targeted interventions are needed. They also provide a positive blueprint: when all five domains are robust, the organizational environment communicates, "You are safe here." This message allows the nervous system to settle, enabling individuals to engage more fully in meaningful, purposeful work.

Implications for Leadership Development and Organizational Policy

This synthesized model—regulating distress through the five domains of safety—has several implications for leadership and organizational practice:

Leadership Development Must Integrate Trauma-Informed Competencies

Safety is not a peripheral issue; it is a core leadership skill. Leadership curricula should include training on trauma, stress, the nervous system, and practical strategies for cultivating safety across all five domains.

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Performance Issues Should be Interpreted Through a Safety Lens

Before labeling behaviors as "difficult" or "noncompliant," leaders should ask: Is this a sign of distress or dysregulation? Integrating a safety lens does not remove accountability, but it encourages compassionate and accurate interpretation, as well as constructive support.

Organizations must embed the five domains into policies, systems, and structures. Safety cannot depend solely on the goodwill of individual leaders. Policies, human resources practices, communication norms, and crisis responses should be explicitly reviewed and redesigned with physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural safety in mind.

Leadership Evaluation Should Include Safety-Based Metrics

Traditional metrics often prioritize output over well-being. Evaluations should assess how leaders contribute to or undermine safety (e.g., through psychological safety indicators, turnover patterns, equity measures, and feedback from direct reports).

Crisis Response and Change Management Must be Trauma Informed

Organizational crises and significant changes (layoffs, mergers, restructuring) activate threat responses. Trauma-informed leaders plan for the emotional impact of change, communicate transparently, and provide support, thereby regulating distress rather than exacerbating it.

Self-Regulation and Self-Care are Crucial for Effective Leadership

Leaders cannot regulate others' distress while consistently disregarding their own. TIL development must include support for leaders' mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, recognizing that many leaders are also trauma survivors or operating under chronic stress.

By embedding the five domains of safety into leadership practice and organizational design, regulating distress becomes a shared, systemic responsibility. This shift moves organizations away from reactive, crisis-driven cultures toward proactive, humane systems capable of sustaining both performance and people.

Conclusion

In a world marked by ongoing individual and collective trauma, leadership that ignores distress is increasingly untenable. Unregulated distress impairs cognition, erodes trust, fractures relationships, and undermines performance. TIL responds to this reality by

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centering the behavior of *regulating distress*—not as a soft, optional trait, but as a critical leadership function grounded in science, ethics, and, for many leaders, theology.

The five domains of safety—physical, psychological, social, moral, and cultural—operationalize this behavior. They offer a clear, research-informed framework for understanding what safety requires and how leaders can create environments in which people's nervous systems can settle, their minds can focus, and their relationships can heal and grow. When these domains are intentionally cultivated, organizations become places not of additional harm, but of refuge and restoration.

Leaders who regulate distress through the five domains of safety do more than manage teams; they steward human lives. They create cultures where individuals can move from mere survival to genuine flourishing, and where organizational success is built on a foundation of dignity, justice, and shared well-being. In this sense, TIL is not only compassionate and ethical; it is strategic, sustainable, and profoundly necessary for modern organizations navigating volatile and uncertain times.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, veteran of the U.S. Army, and founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and is the developer of the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that integrates neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work explores how trauma-informed practices strengthen leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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The Role of Organizational Culture and Pastoral Leadership in Sustainable Church Outreach: A Multisite Mini-Ethnographic Case Study

Althea P. Gordon-Scott
Southeastern University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study examined the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in two churches that have sustainable outreach programs. The themes derived from the data were altruistic foundations, relational equity, exemplary pastoral leadership, organizational challenges, organizational agility and systems, and the centrality of God. Though these themes are distinct, they are interconnected. Altruistic foundations encompasses recognizing needs, compassion, and responding to needs through service. Relational equity is gained through relationships with the community (consistency and valuing people and human dignity), relationships among organizational members, and partnerships with other organizations. Exemplary pastoral leadership guides organizations through the senior pastors' visions, leading by example and relational equity. These two churches have faced challenges, but they have forged ahead with organizational agility and effective systems. The centrality of God fuels altruism, relationships, pastoral leadership, and organizational agility despite the challenges these organizations experienced.

Keywords: pastoral leadership, organizational culture, sustainable outreach, church

Church organizational culture and pastoral leadership could be impacting the increased secularization in the 21st century. Church attendance has declined in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2021). This trend is concerning for many churches (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021). Declining church attendance may indicate that churches are not effectively fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19)—engaging their non-Christian neighbors through outreach. This trend may also signal that the church is losing the relevance it once had in society and may need to regain social capital (Van Buren, 2002). Though studies have noted a move away from religion toward secularization (Adams, 2022; Teixeira, 2023), they do not address how churches' organizational culture and pastoral leadership may impact their engagement with their communities. This research fulfilled Geertz's (1973) call to study the cultural system in

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religious organizations. Foppen and van Saane (2024) also recommended building on the theoretical foundations of effective pastoral leadership. This study examined the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in sustainable church outreach programs.

Conceptual Framework

Organizational culture has three principal theoretical underpinnings. These frameworks are Denison's, Schein's, and the competing values framework (CVF). Involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission are the four components of organizational culture proposed by Denison and Mishra (1989). Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) highlighted the values within organizations through the CVF. These values are adhocracy and market, embodying the external facets of organizational culture and clan and hierarchy—the internal facets of organizational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Schein (1986) posited that organizational culture is the set of ingrained practices that influence how people act, react, and solve problems without requiring overt or conscious thought. He explained that behavior is not culture; it is the underlying assumptions that determine culture.

In 1990, Schein introduced three levels of culture (artifacts, values, and assumptions) and advocated for inductive research as the best approach to uncover organizational culture. Artifacts are easily experienced with the five senses. They occur at the surface level and do not show the reasoning behind that object or behavior. Values are the ideologies, philosophies, and ideas that organizational stakeholders articulate verbally and in writing. Assumptions are at the unconscious levels of thinking and cannot easily be observed, yet they influence people's actions, feelings, motives, and perceptions. People respond to their organization's culture in different ways: (a) custodial orientation—they totally conform to all elements of the culture, (b) creative individualism—they choose to follow the core principles and reject the others, and (c) rebellion—they leave or sabotage or otherwise work to destroy the culture. Schein (1990) also noted that organizations are open systems that learn and evolve in response to internal and external factors.

Pastoral leadership is critical to the mission and vision of the church. Pastoral leadership is sometimes conceptualized in terms of worship service experiences (Barentsen, 2023). However, senior pastors are administrative leaders in their churches (Kim, 2019). Pastors have many responsibilities similar to those of executive leaders in other industries (McKenna et al., 2007) and set priorities and facilitate the execution of the church's mission and vision (Keita & Lao, 2020). Pastors have authority but are not absolved from accountability to God and the church (Jentile, 2021).

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Pastoral leader effectiveness is strongly correlated with achievement-oriented, organized, and reliable pastors (Carter, 2009). Transformational leadership is moderately related to effective pastoral leadership. Rojas (2018) suggested there is a life cycle to pastoral leadership. When pastors go to a new church, it may take time to build trust with their congregants (Strunk et al., 2017). Strunk et al. (2017) contended that a primary goal of the pastors in their study was to invest in developing healthy relationships in their churches. Competent listening and altruistic leadership are associated with spiritual experiences among ministry leaders (Choi et al., 2019).

Though pastoral ministry intersects with various aspects of people's lives, much of pastoral ministry is focused on internal stakeholders (e.g., Williams & Cousin, 2021). Nicolaides (2020) revealed that while paternalistic pastoral leadership contributed to numerical church growth, encouraging leadership facilitated church vitality and spiritual maturity. Wollschleger (2018) suggested that future research examine the role of pastors in shaping congregational outcomes. Though the current study focused on churches with outreach programs, its qualitative design enabled exploration of pastoral leadership and organizational culture in these churches' outcomes.

Research Questions

RQ1: What role does organizational culture play in the development of sustainable church outreach?

RQ2: What are the assumptions and values that influence sustainable church outreach?

RQ3: What role does pastoral leadership play in developing sustainable church outreach?

RQ4: What interconnections exist between organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that have sustainable outreach programs?

Methodology

The present study utilized a multisite case study embedded with ethnographic principles. This qualitative design facilitated the study of organizational culture within multiple churches with robust outreach programs. A mini-ethnographic case study has been used to research leadership emergence and development (Gibbs et al., 2020) and is good for researching specific topics in short timeframes (Fusch et al., 2017). Leadership is inextricably linked to culture. Ethnographies are used to analyze cultural patterns, which include values, beliefs, and behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies are used to explore real-life situations with specific contexts. Schein (1990) purported that ethnographic methodology is one of the most empirical ways to study organizational

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culture, but concluded that it is time consuming. The variables in Schein's organizational culture model, assumptions, values, and artifacts (including behaviors) are comparable to the focus of ethnographies and this study.

Participants. Purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used to select the organizations for this study. To be invited to participate in the study, the two churches had to provide outward-focused, reliable, and regular programs and services that engaged their non-Christian neighbors on a daily, weekly, monthly, or other regular basis. Isolated, irregular, or annual events are not considered sustainable. The participating churches were informally screened based on my prior knowledge of the church programs. I was introduced to organizational leaders from each church by a mutual associate. The two churches are located in different geographies within the United States. The size and demographics of these two churches were also in contrast.

I visited each church for 6 days. One church, given the pseudonym Cyprus, is located in the Great Lakes region of the United States; the other, given the pseudonym Lystra, is situated in the Western United States. Both churches are in major cities in their respective regions. Lystra's operation includes residential programs and requires over $10 million annually, whereas Cyprus is a much smaller entity and operates on approximately $700,000. This budget includes money raised to fund a building project that will provide housing. From observations, Cyprus Church consists mostly of Black congregants; however, there were a few people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Lystra seemed to be a mix of mostly White and Hispanic, but also included Black and other ethnic backgrounds. Cyprus Church had about 80 attendees on the Sunday morning I visited, whereas Lystra hosted at least a few thousand (the church can seat up to 5,000 people).

Data Collection and Analysis. Data were collected through on-site observations, document analysis, and individual and focus group interviews within each organization and informal conversations with internal and external stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Soon after these conversations, I jotted down key points and wrote more detailed field notes as soon as possible. I shadowed selected participants, sat quietly to observe without getting involved, and, on other occasions, participated in the activities with others. To uncover people's perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015), two homogenous focus groups (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) were conducted at each site. One group included non-managerial staff (larger church) or unpaid church leaders (smaller church); the other group consisted of church members. In addition, semistructured interviews were conducted. Interview protocols were created for each interview. Though there were prewritten questions, the researcher asked follow-up questions as needed to better understand the phenomena being discussed (Fusch et al., 2017).

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After collecting data during field visits, several steps were taken to systematically organize and analyze the large volume of data (Saldaña, 2021). The focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. After automated transcription, I read the transcripts several times. While listening to the audio, I deleted inconsequential words like "um" and corrected errors in the initial transcriptions. Field observations were recorded with handwritten jottings on the field observation log. The log included columns for reactions or thoughts, date, time, number of hours, location, and observation. Observation, interview transcripts, and organizational artifacts were coded, categorized, and formulated into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

Six themes surfaced regarding organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that engage in sustainable outreach programs: altruistic foundations, relational equity, exemplary pastoral leadership, organizational challenges, organizational agility and systems, and centrality of God. The organizational cultures of these churches are grounded in altruistic foundations and flourish through relational equity. The organizational agility of these churches helps them persevere through challenges. Exemplary pastoral leadership, along with the centrality of God in these organizations, continues to advance the vision.

Theme 1: Altruistic Foundations. Outreach is grounded in altruism. These churches' leaders and other stakeholders perceive the needs and selflessly find ways to meet those needs. These organizational members develop compassion for their community members as needs become apparent, then provide relevant services to combat the hardships they experience. Recognizing the needs yields compassion, and compassion yields a response through service.

Recognizing Needs. Recognizing and responding to the needs in their neighborhoods is the whole purpose of the outreach. Lystra did not meet a plethora of needs when the senior pastor started ministering in that area. He addressed one need at a time; eventually, it evolved into a 24-hour-a-day multimillion-dollar operation. Pastor Barak told the story of how his senior pastor's failure catapulted him into serving the community: "So he took his desk out into the sidewalk and just tried to meet people during the day . . . And then from that, he got around the need." This pastor physically went out to the community because people were not coming to the church; as he engaged with people in the neighborhood, he became cognizant of one need and then another, driving the evolution of the outreach ministry.

Compassion. "Stop for the one" was a phrase repeated by Tabitha in the leader focus group at Cyprus. This phrase captures the idea that each person matters and deserves compassion when experiencing hardship. Pastor Mordecai explained the organizational

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characteristics of Cyprus: "I believe that this church is driven by love, passion, care . . . We are very compassionate about what we do as a church, that we don't pass people by. We don't ignore the needs of folks."

Responding to Need Through Service. Organizational members in Lystra and Cyprus see serving through outreach as a natural part of their existence. Outreach is ingrained in their cultures. Claudia's thoughts show how the culture of service permeates Cyprus:

> I think anyone that comes here is going to learn how to serve. And the beautiful thing is you don't have to be super talented . . . We serve to simply love . . . this is a church where we cultivate service and at the same time, the beautiful thing is that we also get served.

Theme 2: Relational Equity. Relational equity was one of the most salient themes to emerge from the data. Relationships are important among colleagues, between leaders and internal stakeholders, between the organization and community members, and between the organization and other entities. The theme of relational equity permeated the overarching code categories and research questions.

Relationships With the Community. Interactions with community members are central to the outward-focused ministries in these churches. These two organizations host events, programs, and services on their campuses and invite people to attend. They also go out into their communities multiple times each week to distribute food and conduct home visits—among other activities. Isaac, a staff member at Lystra, conveyed that people in the community know them and feel safe around them:

> When we meet people on outreach, they're going to get the same love and acceptance and welcome spirit . . . I feel like the people who know us really are so themselves around us, and it seems that they just feel safe.

Consistency. Providing consistent, compassionate service to the community helps to build relational equity. Consistency allows both churches to build relational equity in the communities they serve. They have continued to show up week after week, year after year, in the same communities, helping the constituents of those neighborhoods. Leaders in both churches expressed that the most successful part of their outreach is building relationships through consistency. Micah, the senior pastor of Cyprus, stated, "I believe one of the most successful thing is that we're reaching a community, and the consistency of us being here has been established." Similarly, Pastor Candace (Lystra) also stated that "consistency" is the most important component of their ministry. Leaders from both churches desire relational equity with those they serve. Through their relationships with community members, they build awareness of what people need and how they can best help the people. The outreach ministries of both churches have been in place for over 30 years; because of this, people trust these organizational

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members to speak to them about issues of faith and practical needs; other entities also trust these organizations to partner with them.

Valuing People and Human Dignity. Valuing people and human dignity is one principle that guided both churches' consistent altruistic activities in their communities. The value of individuals was captured in Naomi's statement in the staff focus group:

> So, I think a big thing, culture in our church, it's been that I think we do pretty well on, and I think we're still working towards, it's just treating everybody as a neighbor and being kind and protecting dignity . . . And that's one thing I really love honestly.

Naomi's statement shows reflection on the process of treating people with dignity. She commended the church but also noted that Lystra's stakeholders are continuing to grow in how they honor human dignity.

Pastor Mordecai, the outreach pastor at Cyprus, explained what impressed and drew him to this church:

> Like the homeless, we welcome and embrace them. There is no prejudice regarding people's gender, social background. We welcome them, we fellowship with them . . . the pastor picking up people from off the streets, people who doesn't, dressed properly, doesn't smell well.

These statements about valuing people were confirmed in my observations. When we were out doing street ministry at Lystra, the staff shook hands, hugged, and laid hands on people—no matter how dirty they were. One of the instructions staff gave was that we should not use hand sanitizer after physical encounters with people on the streets. Welcoming and embracing people, regardless of their hygiene or socioeconomic status, indicates a value for human dignity, and this culture was attractive to Pastor Mordecai and grounds the staff and volunteers in both churches as they engage in ministry.

Relationships Among Organizational Members. Both churches have a network of relationships among their staff and members. This strong network is necessary for cohesion and unity as they serve their neighbors. Their congeniality and care for each other start inside their church and overflows as they engage in ministry. Jacob, a Lystra staff member, expressed gratitude for the relationships he gets to have with the people with whom he lives and serves: "I get to be here around all these people, and when in my life am I going to be in communal living with people who love Jesus?" Pastor Keziah of Cyprus also emphasized that having strong relationships among all members of the church is important: "So the whole community, that's one of our values, that we have to do in life together." These two statements from stakeholders at both churches indicate the value they place on relationships within their organizations.

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Partnerships With Organizational and Government Entities. Both organizations invite others to partner with them. Lystra's website stated, "If you are an organization interested in doing good works, click here to find out how you can get involved with Lystra!" Cyprus's website has a similar invitation: "Come spend a week serving." Both organizations partner with government entities. Pastor Candace stated, "love the idea of us partnering with the government." She was discussing the work they do within the foster care system to help families stay together. Likewise, Pastor Keziah from Cyprus itemized some of the entities their church works with: "the aldermans, the police precincts, the public schools, the park districts." Partnering with other entities enhances the outreach these two churches provide.

Theme 3: Exemplary Pastoral Leadership. People admire, respect, and emulate their senior pastors at Cyprus and Lystra. During the focus groups, people praised their senior pastors for their work, believed they carried out their responsibilities with fidelity, and inspired others to follow their lead. In response to how her senior pastor influences outreach ministries, Lystra Church member Jael stated, "He is the outreach." Moses, a leader from Cyprus Church, pointed out that outreach is central to the senior pastor's leadership: "It's really at the forefront of his heart. The forefront of his ministry is the outreach. He influence it and he leads by example. He's involved." Outreach is not just an addendum to either of these churches; it is a core part of the churches' vision and mission, as both senior pastors exemplify.

Senior Pastors' Vision. To garner buy-in from stakeholders, the senior pastor must embody the stated vision. The vision starts with the perceived spiritual and material exigencies in society and the desire to meet those needs. Service, compassion, consistency and dependability, flexibility and creativity, strong relationships, and transformation encompass these churches' visions. For people to serve well, they must know the vision. Continual reminders of the vision's significance are essential to keep people grounded as they engage in various aspects of ministry.

Stakeholders take their cue from the senior pastor. The pastor must embody consistent and dependable service to their communities. When asked what specific values they saw in the pastoral staff that aligned with outreach, Gaius said, "Consistency came to my mind." In the leader focus group at Cyprus, Tabitha also shared the senior pastor's connection to outreach: "Just seeing and hearing their vision and their values and then seeing them model that, seeing them live the lifestyle of the vision, living the lifestyle of their values." The lifestyle and vision she referred to alluded to the consistency with which the senior pastor carries out the outreach ministries of the church. The senior pastors at both Lystra and Cyprus have been consistent in the vision they put before their congregations and have worked diligently with other stakeholders to see this vision carried out over many years.

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Leading by Example. At both Cyprus and Lystra, people spoke highly of their senior pastors. They also mentioned that these pastors set great examples for them. Claudia, from Cyprus, characterizes her senior pastor and his wife:

> I think they are people who lead by example. They're not just about talk. They actually, I think lead more by example than talk . . . So, it's not like a performance, it's by character. And so, I think the way that we become who we are is from more of a heart transformation and we see it in them.

She posited that the senior pastor's directives to them on how to be welcoming are not mere surface gestures but genuinely a part of his and Pastor Keziah's characters. The pastor's characteristics are reflected in the staff and congregational attitude.

Pastoral Relational Equity. Relational equity is at the nexus of pastoral leadership and organizational culture. The data revealed that both senior pastors are relational. Their affable personalities are a hallmark of how they approach ministry and, hence, how their churches engage in ministry. Naomi, a staff member at Lystra, expressed her love and appreciation for how her senior pastor builds relationships: "I love about him is that he's really approachable . . . You can always approach him. He's very personable. I mean, just last week he invited a ton of people to the beach." These non-managerial staff members admired how their senior pastor, who oversees a very large organization, makes gestures to build relationships with them beyond their work.

Co-leadership. During interviews at both organizations, participants consistently referred to the senior pastor and his wife in response to questions about the senior pastor. Stakeholders in the organizations view both senior pastor and spouse as decision-making leaders. While interviewing Pastor Candace, she responded to a question about the senior pastor: "I think the pastor's role is to provide vision, is to give us the big picture, give us his or her direction that they feel like God is asking us to go." I clarified that I was speaking about Pastor [senior pastor's name] and she responded, "Yeah,—[name of senior pastor's wife], they co-pastors." These statements indicated that organizational members are not just politely including the senior pastor's wife in their verbiage; she is actively engaged in leadership decisions, and they respect her co-leadership with her husband. The senior pastor at Cyprus also explained his co-leadership with his wife: "She's not just following my lead that God speaks to her as well . . . she's too valuable to the ministry. And that's why I said we both lead the church." In this anecdote, Pastor Micah expressed that his wife leads alongside him. For this reason, he encouraged her to obtain the ministry credentials so her leadership would not be dismissed but more broadly recognized.

Theme 4: Organizational Challenges. Outreach ministry is demanding and multifaceted. These complexities influence the pastor and the entire organization's

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culture. These challenges include the impact of the external environment, the emotional toll, and the retention rate. Both churches have found ways to navigate these obstacles.

Finances. Finances, though not directly culture or leadership, affect many facets of the organization. Both churches experience pecuniary hurdles despite the vast difference in their annual budgets. In their interviews, both executive leaders from Lystra emphasized that though there are opportunities to obtain more funding, they would have to eliminate the gospel message, which is not an option they are willing to take. Budgets affect everything and everyone, from staff to buildings, vehicles, and all other ministry operations. Retaining staff is a challenge in Lystra, while hiring full-time staff and retaining part-time staff is a struggle for Cyprus due to limited funds to pay personnel.

Retention. The data show that both organizations appear to have a high turnover rate among non-managerial staff. Upper-echelon leaders stay with these churches for decades, whereas many others come and go every few years. Finances, as well as the emotional toll of this type of work, impact retention.

Emotional Toll. Several people mentioned that outreach ministry is hard emotionally. They do not always get to experience success. They work hard physically and give of themselves emotionally, but often do not see the results they expect. The people they invest in sometimes do not change as they anticipated, experience no obvious change, or vacillate between progress and setbacks. Pastor Candace captured the essence of this struggle: "It's exhausting hard work because you feel like you're losing more than you're winning." Pastor Keziah (Cyprus) also captured the emotional toll it takes to see people they invested in teeter between progress and setback: "And then it's always an awesome thing when they fail and learn from it. But before they can get to that point, the many times they fail, and some quit along the way." Pastor Keziah also connected the high "turnover rates" to "burnout." The emotional burdens that come with outreach ministries thwart many people's ability to go beyond a few years. It is challenging for staff when lives are not transformed as the staff had hoped.

External Environment. Organizations are affected by their external environment. Several prevailing circumstances affect Cyprus and Lystra. Various facets of the socioeconomic environment, family dynamics in the community, governmental structures, and transience impact how these churches do outreach. These factors influence trust. The senior pastor at Cyprus highlighted the challenges of gaining trust: "Trust that has been violated in such a huge way here that it takes people a long time to trust you." Pastor Micah noted there are myriad reasons that promote distrust in the communities they serve. Pastor Barak, the executive pastor at Lystra, discussed distrust in relation to the transience that affects people, even if they themselves are not transient, "but they still are affected by this transientness that's going on around them. Creates

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distrust, it creates a sense of skepticism." Gaining the trust of the people in these communities takes consistent service and fidelity to the churches' missions to continually engage with and care for them.

Theme 5: Organizational Agility and Systems. A part of altruism comes from humility and openness to learning new ways to minister to people's needs. Gaius, a staff member in the focus group, started the brief conversation about short-term compassionate service: "We're going to open up an emergency shelter." Isaac and Rachel chimed in. Isaac added, "Right, exactly. Half our staff, is running an emergency shelter. Now, yesterday you didn't know you were going to be doing that." Rachel concluded with this anecdote of a shared experience: "And then driving out to the communities to pick up people to come before the rain hit, so crazy." These altruistic actions warrant their flexibility and creativity.

The ministry at Cyprus also requires flexibility and creativity. They use a multipurpose space for their worship services. During my field visit, I witnessed this space transform from a basketball court to a sanctuary and a banquet hall—complete with a play area to spare. The current church (Sunday service) location is a recreation center or community center in prior years. The basketball court remains a part of the space, allowing different organizations and programs to use it for sports and recreation during the week. The office area of the church was once the balcony used to view games on the basketball court. This repurposed space not only houses administrative offices but also the pregnancy resource center. The adult Sunday school is held in a small area of the preschool. Folding chairs are lined up in what is typically used for a hallway. I sat right next to the cubbies labeled with children's names that held items like diapers and wipes. Their use of space demonstrates their creativity and flexibility in devising solutions to accommodate diverse programs and services.

One of the most structured components of Lystra is its recovery residential program. The executive pastor stated, "It's very structured for people coming out of homelessness and drug addiction." Most of the people in the discipleship program had unhealthy patterns; establishing a scheduled rhythm was helpful for the discipleship process. The senior pastor of Cyprus has implemented several structures during his tenure in the church. He explained that "people see the structure but it's not so tight that they feel that they're not welcome." He postulated that structure is necessary for people to thrive, but does not preclude a welcoming environment. His belief is similar to the rationale for the very structured recovery program at Lystra.

Theme 6: The Centrality of God. God is the reason for these outreach ministries. People in these churches believe God has called them to serve and be a source of hope for their communities. "We are a community who believes that it is a privilege to serve

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our Creator by serving His creation!" is one of the statements on Lystra's website that encourages its congregants to participate in serving.

People in both organizations believe that God allows them to be part of His process to help others. The executive pastor of Lystra explained, "It's average everyday people just being consistent and then how God just produces so much fruit from that." Mary, a Cyprus Church member, referenced a scripture when she discussed how God works with them: "And that's another value that is not dependent on us. We have a part to play, but some plant, some water, but God brings." Ruth finished her statement with "the increase." Stakeholders of both organizations believe God helps them do more than they can on their own.

The Great Commission. Sharing this gospel message is a central teaching that propels the outreach ministries in these two churches. Stakeholders at these two churches believe sharing the gospel through outreach will help to transform lives. Pastor Esther (Cyprus) noted, "the vision of changing lives, not just by giving physical resources, but encouraging them to know the Lord. Jael, a Lystra member, stated this idea clearly: "We go out with a mission, a mission to bring those in that don't know Jesus." Jael's statement indicates an urgency to share the gospel with people so they will experience eternal salvation. "The responsibility of the conversion, that's ultimately God," according to Mary, a Cyprus Church member.

Transformation. Transformation is possible with the right support and services, regardless of the situation. Cyprus' motto is "Changing our city one life at a time" and was reiterated in the interviews as well as in the Sunday morning worship services. This motto is focused on helping individuals have transformative experiences that will spread to change their communities positively. The repetition of this motto likely means it was significant to the church stakeholders and helped them remember the objective of the ministries they orchestrate. Pastor Barak (Lystra) stated, "Our mission is transforming lives, transforming lives and community through Christ. God brings the transformation. We just create the environment and God breathes into it." Based on his statement, God is the one who brings about transformation; God guides the organization to put mechanisms in place that promote life change.

Discussion

The data show that organizational culture and pastoral leadership influence sustainable outreach. The senior pastors' personalities and leadership greatly influenced the culture that facilitated sustainable outreach in their churches. Both churches had strong, relational, and service-oriented cultures that acted as the impetus for regularly serving their communities. The smaller church (Cyprus) actively engaged the community multiple times per week, both on and off the church campus. The larger church (Lystra)

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provided services 24 hours a day on the campus and multiple times per week off campus.

These programs and services engage their non-Christian neighbors and give these organizations positive reputations in the communities they serve. Community leaders and government agencies also partner with these churches to benefit the community members. These two organizations serve the common good and hence can be considered organizations that bring public value (Meynhardt et al., 2020). Meynhardt et al. (2020) showed a positive link between organizational public value and organizational citizenship behavior, as well as work engagement. During the interviews, staff and other organizational stakeholders seemed passionate and enthusiastic about the work their churches do in the community to add value to people's lives.

Several principles can be deduced from the findings of this research to answer the research questions: sacrificial service, hopefulness, welcoming environment, people's need to connect with God, the Great Commission, human dignity, the leader exemplifying service, vision casting, and empowering leadership.

Research Question 1 focused on organizational culture: What role does organizational culture play in the development of sustainable church outreach? This study's findings indicate that organizational culture's role in church outreach is significant. These data inform researchers and practitioners that there is a cost to altruism. Developing sustainable outreach is facilitated by a culture of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment. As in the current study, Grusendorf and Acevedo (2022) found that knowing and addressing the needs of people in their neighborhoods was critical to the participant churches' cultures.

Research Question 2 asked: What are the assumptions and values that influence sustainable outreach? Schein (1986) posited that assumptions are not easily seen but are covert principles that guide organizational practices without conscious thought. Conversely, values are often embedded in an organization's mission and vision statements or other overt mechanisms (Rosen, 2023). The findings of this study indicate that the primary assumptions in churches that engage in sustainable outreach are related to God. The centrality of God and the gospel are paramount; people must be connected to God, and people—created in God's image—are valuable. Fulfilling the Great Commission constitutes serving God and serving people simultaneously. People are served because their innate dignity is valued. The present study is a reminder to practitioners that doing outreach does not diminish the gospel and the centrality of God to the church. The centrality of God and the gospel are the catalyst for outreach. The findings of this study also contribute to the academic literature, reaffirming the notion that underlying assumptions infuse organizational culture.

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Exemplary pastoral leadership played a vital role in developing sustainable outreach in these two churches. Pastoral leaders are critical to the development of church outreach. The senior pastors of these two churches embodied the five practices that Kouzes and Posner (2004) delineated as characteristics leaders should exemplify: modeling for others, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the status quo, enabling others to act, and encouraging the hearts of people. Research Question 3 asked: What role does pastoral leadership play in developing sustainable church outreach? Pastoral leaders must embody and communicate the precepts they desire their congregants and stakeholders to live by. The data from the current study strongly support the principle that organizational characteristics often mimic the attributes of the executive leader. For churches to develop sustainable church outreach, pastors must exemplify service, use empowering leadership, and communicate their vision through words and actions.

Research Question 4 asked: What interconnections exist between organizational culture and pastoral leadership in churches that have sustainable outreach programs? Participant responses showed there is a strong interconnection between pastoral leadership and organizational culture. A study conducted in a flight school showed student performance had a positive relationship with leadership; however, their performance was more strongly correlated to organizational culture (Gokalp & Soran, 2022). The current study indicated that the churches' cultures mirrored the leadership style and personalities of the pastors. These pastors had created church cultures of sacrificial service that warranted awareness of their external environments, organizational agility, and consistency. Pastors and church constituents will likely establish sustainable outreach with awareness of their context, flexibility, and regular and dependable service to their community.

Theoretical Implications. The characteristics of the pastoral leaders were similar to what other scholars found to be effective through leadership and organizational studies research (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Findings from this study overlap with other organizational culture and leadership theories (Chaudhary & Panda, 2018) and findings from exegetical analysis (Pickwell, 2022).

The findings support existing theories. In Smith and Besharov's (2019) longitudinal case study, three themes emerged: "formal organizational structure, individual leadership expertise, and external stakeholder relationships" (p. 9). These three themes resemble three of the themes in the current study: organizational agility and systems, exemplary pastoral leadership, and relational equity. The broader social culture and external environment influenced the organizational cultures of the churches in the current study and the organizations in Nurullah Rabbani et al.'s (2024) study.

Theory needs to be developed on pastoral leadership in churches that engage in sustainable outreach, and this research provided insight into possible characteristics

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that pastors who lead these churches embody. This research also confirmed existing theories that leadership drives organizational culture (Okwata et al., 2022), communicating vision effectively is important to develop shared mental models (Zhou & Pazos, 2021), relational equity (Bradley, 2021), and willingness to change traditions and structures (Kraft, 2021) are essential components of running productive organizations.

This study broadened our understanding of pastoral leadership and church culture. According to Foppen and van Saane's (2024) scoping literature review on religious leadership, attendance and church growth are the most used criteria to measure religious leaders' effectiveness. The current study contributed additional insight by exploring pastoral leadership holistically in connection with outreach, allowing participants and organizational artifacts to tell the story of their pastors' leadership.

Practical Implications. Practitioners could glean some insights from the findings of the current study. Nine key elements grouped in three categories descend from the organizational culture and pastoral leadership. The repeated use of double-ended arrows in Figure 1 indicates there is a cyclical and interdependent relationship among these concepts—they are all intricately intertwined and illustrate the interconnections of sustainable church outreach to organizational culture and pastoral leadership. Churches must have these fundamentals included in their efforts to stimulate sustainable outreach.

Sustainable outreach begins with the church's assumption that people need to be connected with God. Outreach is done for God and is sustained by God to bring people to God. The findings in the current research align with Lilleorg et al.'s (2021) study on growing churches. Churches that desire to engage in outreach must realize that God is central to all aspects of their church and its outreach. This need to connect with God both causes and is affected by the desire to fulfill the Great Commission and preserve human dignity as seen by the double-ended arrows in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Interconnections of Outreach

Likewise, preserving human dignity and fulfilling the Great Commission is an antecedent and corollary of outreach. Fulfilling the Great Commission is closely aligned with organizational principles, whereas preserving human dignity is closely aligned with relational principles. The relational and organizational principles feed and are fed by pastoral leadership. Organizational principles (i.e., organizational agility, consistency, and organizational awareness of the external environment), pastoral leadership (i.e., exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering leadership), and relational principles (i.e., hopefulness, a welcoming and loving environment, and sacrificial service) work together to propel sustainable outreach.

Pastors who exemplify service validate the vision they communicate. Other insights are that pastors communicate in words and actions; their actions may motivate and inspire internal stakeholders to serve more than their words. Trusted pastoral leadership entails vision casting, authenticity, and consistency (Grusendorf & Acevedo, 2022). People must perceive the pastor as trustworthy for his vision to permeate the culture.

The findings indicate the need for consistent service, building internal and external relational equity, exercising agility, and engaging in sacrificial service to pursue outreach. To start serving, pastors and church stakeholders must recognize the needs in

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their community and begin to respond to those needs. Churches must move from primarily focusing inward and begin to observe what is going on in their surroundings and build relationships with their neighbors to discern the needs around them (Zscheile, 2015). According to Zscheile (2015), failure may be a part of the process when developing solutions to the problems in the community; therefore, churches must remain agile to continue in these ventures.

These findings also correlate to salient themes in Teasdale and Trefz's (2016) study showing the need for building relationships, a viable team, financial resources, and efficient systems to carry out the vision. The current study's findings indicate that to effectively engage in sustainable outreach, churches may need to have a culture of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment; see people's need to connect with God; prioritize the Great Commission and human dignity; and have a pastor who leads by exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering others.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.

This study used ethnographic tenets within a multisite case study to explore organizational culture and pastoral leadership in two churches that participated in sustainable outreach. Though I spent about 6 days at each site, my access to people and places within the organizations was limited. To avert issues related to limited access, Schein (1993) suggested organizational research should be done through clinical experiences because certain system dynamics will only surface during the change process, and a passive researcher cannot capture those dynamics. Future research should include longitudinal studies in churches at varying stages of initiating and sustaining outreach development. Longitudinal studies could involve the researcher in a clinician role (Schein, 1993), serving an organization over several months, a year, or longer. Actively participating in an organization's culture as a research clinician (Schein, 2006) may help the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the organization that would not be uncovered in a purely research role.

Future qualitative and quantitative studies should include using other organizational culture frameworks to study churches. The current study used Schein's (1990) organizational culture framework to explore the culture and leadership in these two churches. The CVF has been used to study churches' organizational culture and effectiveness (Boggs & Fields, 2006). However, the field could benefit from using Denison's (Denison & Mishra, 1995) model or the CVF (Cameron & Quinn, 2011) for quantitative analysis. Principles from any of these three models, as well as other existing models, could be applied to other qualitative analyses, such as phenomenology, to explore the perceptions of leaders and other church stakeholders.

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The current study focused on churches that were engaged in outreach primarily catering to individuals experiencing economic hardship. However, spiritual exigency is not limited to people who struggle financially. More studies are needed to explore the phenomenon of providing sustainable outreach to middle-class and upper-echelon members of society. I join Teasdale and Trefz (2016) to suggest future research on outreach in several categories: the relationship between church participation in social, political, and economic arenas and outreach; space needed for outreach; cross-denominational outreach efforts; and pastoral preparation for outreach.

Summary

This study explored the role of organizational culture and pastoral leadership in sustainable church outreach within the context of a multisite mini-ethnographic case study. Two churches with some major differences in terms of size, demographics, financial resources, and region within the United States participated. Despite their differences, there were similarities in their pastoral leadership and organizational cultures. During the field visits, these similarities were not readily apparent, indicating churches can have unique characteristics yet hold some core values and assumptions that guide their outreach. Churches that engage in sustainable outreach are not carbon copies of each other but uniquely embody the principles of sacrificial service, hopefulness, and a welcoming environment; see people's need to connect with God; prioritize the Great Commission and human dignity; display organizational agility, consistency, and organizational awareness of external needs; and have a pastor who leads by exemplifying service, communicating vision, and empowering others.

About the Author

Dr. Gordon-Scott has been an educator and advocate for students with diverse learning needs and cultural backgrounds for over 16 years in the New York City public school system. She proactively finds solutions that benefit organizational stakeholders because she is a champion for students' success. She has initiated and maintained relationships with multiple organizations to provide transition services to students and is currently working with school leaders and teachers to fine tune the implementation of the school's multitiered system of support in literacy. She has mentored new teachers, served as a team leader, and been a member of several committees.

She cares about organizational health and has researched organizational culture, leadership, group dynamics, and other facets of organizational behavior. As a trustee of a nonprofit organization, she collaborates with other leaders to foster a healthy culture that enables stakeholders to thrive.

Dr. Gordon-Scott is an ordained minister. She earned her Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Southeastern University. She also holds a Master of Science in

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Education and a Master of Divinity. She is a thoughtful communicator who has crafted and delivered lectures and other presentations to diverse audiences, including educators, organizational leaders, church attendees, and scholars.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to gordalpaul@gmail.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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The Nurses' Perception of Their Immediate Supervisors' Servant Leadership Behaviors and Their Sense of Work Effectiveness in a Selection of Dar es Salaam Public Hospitals of Tanzania

Gladness E. Mtango
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between nurses' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and their sense of work effectiveness in a selection of Tanzanian public hospitals. I utilized servant leadership theory, which has its roots in Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf proposed that leaders adopt a servant position in their relationships with their followers. In analyzing servant leadership behaviors, I utilized the Essential Servant Leadership Behavior (ESLB) scale (Winston & Fields, 2015). I also used the Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire (CWEQ) II (Laschinger et al., 2001) to assess work effectiveness. Winston and Fields (2015) stated that the ESLB provides a valid theory and technique for measuring leaders' servant leadership behaviors, showing a strong relationship between servant leadership behaviors and followers' judgments on outcomes such as job satisfaction, trust, and low burnout, which are characteristics measured by the CWEQ II. I also chose the CWEQ II because it was specifically designed to measure nurses' perceptions of their direct supervisor's bureaucratic behaviors. The CWEQ II has also been proven to be valid and reliable, which fits the purpose of this study. Tanzania has shown interest in adopting servant leadership (Chandaruba, 2019). The study results suggest that there are perceived positive and statistically significant relationships between servant leadership and work effectiveness in Tanzania and differences in access to CWEQ II constructs by hospital size, except for access to opportunities, where no significant differences by hospital size were found. This study is the first known servant leadership study in the Tanzanian hospital system, thereby closing the gap in servant leadership theory and practice. Additional studies are recommended to replicate this study and to include other regions of Tanzania and other parts of the world. Using qualitative and mixed methods, together with other instruments for analyzing servant leadership and work effectiveness, is also recommended.

Keywords: servant leadership, essential leader behaviors, work effectiveness

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Greenleaf (1977) proposed that servant leaders should assume the servant position in their association with their followers. Since then, more researchers have emphasized the importance of servant leadership (Chandaruba, 2019; Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005, 2007; Farling et al., 1999; Patterson, 2003; R. Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya et al., 2008, 2020; Wong & Page, 2000, 2003). Servant leadership emphasizes serving others and practicing shared goals, enabling followers to grow to their full potential (Sfetcu, 2021). Servant leaders practice power sharing, total quality, work teams, and participative leadership while giving followers opportunities and support for both personal and organizational goals (Sfetcu, 2021; Wong & Page, 2000). According to van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), servant leaders are stewards of resources for their organizations who focus on improving the welfare of their followers, supporting the needs of others, and with a dutiful approach to work, power sharing, and giving a voice to their followers while focusing on the long run instead of short-run performance.

Research in servant leadership has evolved from a conceptual development phase (Greenleaf, 1977; Wong & Page, 2000), followed by a measurement phase (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005, 2007; Ehrhart, 2004; Laub, 1999), developing instruments and testing relationships between servant leadership and follower outcomes; this has been followed by a model development phase testing more sophisticated designs (Eva et al., 2019). The theoretical foundation for servant leadership research was pioneered by Graham (1991). Since then, it has demonstrated its uniqueness as a leadership theory, different from other forms of leadership (Peterson et al., 2012).

Servant leadership research has appeared in prominent management and leadership journals (Chen, Y. et al., 2015; Liden, R. C. et al., 2014; Neubert, M. J. et al., 2016). Research in servant leadership has expanded to other disciplines, including natural behavioral sciences (Waterman, 2011), hospitality (Lin et al., 2016), schools (Cerit, 2009), and public service (Chandaruba, 2019). Due to its interdisciplinary nature, servant leadership research appears in prominent journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly* and the *Journal of Management* (Eva et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2021). There are about 16 known servant leadership measures; among them are those by the authors Laub (1999), Ehrhart (2004), Dennis and Bocarnea (2005, 2007), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006), Patterson (2003), Liden et al. (2008, 2015), and Winston and Fields (2015).

The current study utilized the Essential Servant Leadership Behavior (ESLB) scale (Winston & Fields, 2015) to find the perceived relationship between servant leadership and the nurses' perception of their sense of work effectiveness in Tanzanian hospitals. I defined essential servant leadership behaviors the those of the focal leader or the immediate supervisor of the nurse participants, and I defined work effectiveness as positive attitudes, reduced burnout, and increased motivation to work (Laschinger et al., 2001).

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I chose the ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, 2015) because it is simple and reliable, with a convergent validity of 0.96%. The instrument was designed to measure servant leaders' behaviors, and its questions address behaviors that followers can easily relate to, for example, emphasizing leaders practicing what they preach or seeing their mission as a responsibility to others. The ESLB asks 10 questions to rate followers' perception of the observable behaviors in servant leadership of their immediate supervisors on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *definitely no or not at all* to *definitely yes or often*. I used the ESLB scale to measure followers' sense of their leader's bureaucratic behaviors (structural empowerment, such as feedback, guidance, or expertise from superiors and peers), as detailed in the research questions and hypotheses.

I also utilized the Conditions of Work Effectiveness Questionnaire (CWEQ) II (Laschinger et al., 2001). The CWEQ II is a 19-item tool with six subscales measuring (a) opportunities, meaning the extent to which one has the opportunity to learn new skills; (b) information, referring to the extent to which one has access to the hospital information; (c) support, which is the extent to which one is provided with problem-solving advice; (d) resources, referring to the extent to which one has time to do the job requirements; (e) informal power, meaning the extent to which one is sought by work peers; and (f) formal power, referring to the extent to which one is rewarded for innovation in their role (Laschinger et al., 2001). I chose the CWEQ II because it extends the Hackman-Oldham job characteristics model (Garg & Rastogi, 2006). The CWEQ II opens the notion of critical psychological states, such as experienced meaningfulness (skill variety, task identity, and task significance), experienced responsibility for the outcome of the work (autonomy), and the knowledge of actual results of work activities (feedback from the job). The CWEQ II was initially designed to measure nurses' sense of bureaucratic behaviors (structural empowerment); therefore, it fits the purpose of this study.

Background

I selected Tanzania as my study area due to its history as a stable African country in terms of both economic and political stability (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019). Tanzania became independent as Tanganyika in 1961 under the charismatic leadership of Julius Kambarage Nyerere (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019). In 1964, Tanganyika united with Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019). Tanzania's economic development began with Nyerere's African socialism (Ujamaa) in 1967; however, by 1985, the country was forced to make major reforms at the recommendation of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and international donors (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019).

Since the 1990s, Tanzania's economy has grown from a GDP of 0.4% per year to 5.2% in 2023 (Regulatory Capacity Review of Tanzania, 2010). From 2019, the microeconomic

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changes in Tanzania have led to societal changes with an impressive performance of 6% to 7% GDP growth (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019). Conversely, the quality of health and education has been generally poor, especially in rural areas (Hirschler & Hofmeier, 2019). Structural transformations in Tanzania have been slow, constrained by several challenges, including declining industrial productivity and competitiveness (African Economic Outlook, 2024). Other challenges include alleged stalled reforms and power tussles within the ruling party, which were blamed for the 2025 post-election protests (Muia, 2025).

To compete on the global stage, Tanzania would need to restructure its leadership and workforce to share common goals and embody the qualities of structural empowerment (Chandaruba, 2019). Empowerment also involves a clear understanding of the lines of responsibility between workers and leaders, including fostering moral and just behaviors, and ensuring that workers have sufficient awareness of their responsibilities and accountability (Mdee & Mushi, 2021). Structural empowerment has been widely used in nursing practice to reflect a perception of work effectiveness through access to resources, information, opportunities, and support, including formal and informal power (Havaei & Dahinten, 2017).

The background for structural empowerment has already been introduced in the Tanzanian hospital systems via the adoption of Kaizen in 2008 (Ministry of Health, 2013). Kaizen is a total quality management philosophy adopted from total quality management (TQM). TQM is an approach developed in Japan and authored by W. E. Deming (Deming, 1982; Gitlow, 1994). Since 2008, structural changes have been made in the hospital system, including training in shared governance, quality circles, and service culture (Ministry of Health, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Tanzania is interested in grooming ethical leaders who are patriotic and devoted to serving their followers (Chandaruba, 2019). There is scant documented evidence of the practice of servant leadership in the country. Only a few studies have been done to study leadership behaviors and employee motivation in Tanzania. The public sector's only comprehensive servant leadership study indicated an increased interest in adopting servant leadership principles (Chandaruba, 2019). Servant leadership evaluation and measurement of work effectiveness will increase leaders' and followers' confidence in their work attitudes (Chandaruba, 2019). There is currently no known study on servant leadership in the Tanzanian healthcare sector (Chandaruba, 2019). Finally, research has found a relationship between followers' perception of their immediate supervisor and followers' sense of empowerment (Winston & Fields, 2015). In this study, I filled the gap in promoting servant leadership as Chandaruba (2019) proposed. I also demonstrated that servant leadership behavior is related to practical

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nurses' perceived leader behavior in the Dar es Salaam region public hospitals in Tanzania.

Studies That Have Addressed the Problem

Problems of job satisfaction and turnover intentions have been widely reported in Tanzania. For example, in his study at the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center referral hospital, Modest reported a 60.2% dissatisfaction among nurses influenced by promotion criteria, salary, decision-making process, supervision, career advancement, and the nature of work. Modest also reported a severe shortage of health personnel.

Msacky and Assey (2024) used a cross-sectional research design to study job satisfaction in Dodoma, Tanzania. They found that overall job satisfaction was 80.87% with 25.65% stemming from nurse employees. Msacky and Assey listed the lack of healthcare workers, heavy workloads, limited budgets, and infrastructure shortages as major limitations. The researchers also highlighted working conditions as a critical issue.

Similarly, Naburi et al. (2017) examined job satisfaction and turnover intentions in public healthcare facilities in Tanzania and revealed that over 54% (114 out of 213) nurses were dissatisfied with their jobs, and 35% planned to leave. Naburi et al. stated that "job dissatisfaction and turnover intention are highest in the Dar es Salaam public health facilities" (p.4). The main causes of job dissatisfaction were pay, workload, equipment, job security, and management.

Kisumbe and Mashala (2020) studied job satisfaction at Shinyanga health facilities and found that job dissatisfaction was only 32%, but there was a lack of employee support at 51.5%, a lack of resources, including a mismatch of assigned responsibilities. Mdee and Mushi (2021) studied the gap between theory and practice for the social accountability approach in Tanzania. Drawing on ethnographic investigations, the researchers found a wide gap between formal lines of accountability and actors' perceptions of blame for performance failure. According to Mdee and Mushi, building a collective understanding of this divergence will provide an effective starting point for interventions to improve work performance.

Van Winkle et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between followers' perceptions of their immediate supervisor's servant leadership and followers' sense of empowerment in small businesses. Servant leadership was strongly correlated with both structural and psychological empowerment. Van Winkle et al. suggested that the unique behavioral characteristics of the servant leader create empowerment, which leads to work effectiveness. Chandaruba (2019) suggested an interest in adopting servant leadership in Tanzania, but noted challenges such as ignorance, lack of patriotism, lack of political will, and other reasons. He also suggested training and emphasis on ethical codes of conduct.

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Other studies have found a positive relationship between servant leadership and job-related attitudinal outcomes (Eva et al., 2019), for example, team effectiveness (Irving & Longbotham, 2007), employee engagement (van Dierendonck et al., 2014), enhancement of follower psychological needs (van Dierendonck et al., 2014), learning and job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009; Mayer et al., 2008), prosperity at work (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022), employability (Chughtai, 2019), perceptions of meaningful work (Khan et al., 2021), personal development of followers (Graham, 1991), relationship between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), minimizing dysfunctional stress (Roberts, 2020), psychological well-being (Rivkin & Schmidt, 2016), inclusive organizations (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016), and enhancing trust (Reinke, 2004). Servant leadership was also negatively associated with emotional exhaustion (Rivkin et al., 2014), burnout (Walumbwa et al., 2019), and turnover intention (Hunter et al., 2013).

Servant leadership has been linked with increased personal and organizational fit (Irving, 2018) and individual job fit (Babakus et al., 2010). Positive relations were also found between CWEQ II and psychological empowerment (Hässler et al., 2022). In the Tanzanian public sector, Chandaruba (2019) found there are many prospects for adopting the principles of servant leadership; however, Chandaruba also found several challenges, including ignorance of servant leadership philosophy, self-interest, lack of political will, lack of patriotism, and lack of a legal framework to enforce public ethics.

Deficiencies in the Studies

Kisumbe and Mashala (2020), Msacky and Assey (2024), Modest (2020), and Naburi et al. (2017) have a common denominator—they focused on multiple worker specialties in healthcare. They did not specialize in a specific cadre of specialization. Being more specific would make it easier for policymakers to design the best strategies for improving job satisfaction in a specific field of specialization. My study focused on nurses to enable policymakers to implement targeted policies addressing the issue of job satisfaction among this particular group of employees.

The deficiency of the Van Winkle et al. (2014) study is that the sample's geographic area was confined to two counties in California, limiting the results' generalizability. In addition, some biases were related to inaccurate representation. The deficiencies in the Chandaruba (2019) study were that it focused mainly on the public sector and did not consider the private sector or other nongovernmental organizations. The study could also have benefited from a qualitative methodology.

Study Objectives

The main objective of the current study was to survey and explore nurses' perceptions in the public hospitals of the Dar es Salaam region, Tanzania, to determine if there is a relationship between their immediate supervisor's servant leadership behavior and

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their job outcomes. Additionally, the study aimed to learn if there is a difference in these job outcomes based on hospital size while controlling for employee tenure. The specific objectives follow:

1. Explore the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to work opportunities, such as challenging work and opportunities to learn new skills.

2. Determine the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to work resources, such as needed equipment and materials.

3. Explore the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to work information, such as their willingness to share information.

4. Determine the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to work support, such as feedback on job activities.

5. Determine the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived formal power, such as work flexibility, decision making, creativity, or visibility.

6. Determine the relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived informal power, such as social connections and communication.

7. Explore variations in servant leadership and work effectiveness influenced by the size of the hospitals and the tenure of the employees in the selected hospitals.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several ways. First, it is the first attempt to measure nurses' sense of their immediate supervisor's servant leadership behaviors and their sense of structural empowerment or work effectiveness in the Tanzanian healthcare system. Second, the study addresses the impact and contribution of servant leadership philosophy in enhancing integrity, patriotism, ethics, and moral standards in the public sector, as Chandaruba (2019) suggested. Third, the study helps close the gap in the need to evaluate the impact of servant leadership on the perception of employee job engagement and job satisfaction in the Tanzanian health sector (Chandaruba, 2019). Finally, the study is significant because it gives the hospitals a golden chance for both leaders and nurses to employ self-evaluation and quality improvement.

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Purpose Statement

At the center of the actions to improve the economic capacities of Tanzania are the recommendations to build a regulatory management system that establishes clear objectives, accountability, and frameworks for implementing regulations (World Bank, 2012). According to Mkunde (2019), the Tanzanian regulatory regime needs effective engagement and coordination to provide for local needs, close the gaps in skill-based or infrastructural resources, close the accountability gap, and clarify unclear or overlapping responsibilities across and between different levels of public service. In this study, I determined the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behavior and the work effectiveness of their followers in the Tanzanian tertiary hospital (large-size hospital), compared to three secondary hospitals combined (medium-size hospitals), and whether ESLB and CWEQ II constructs differ by tenure and hospital size. Work effectiveness in this study refers to positive work behaviors and attitudes leading to job satisfaction, commitment, less burnout, and trust. This will help guide leadership in determining the resources needed to improve their organizational competitiveness.

Literature Review

In this study, I determined the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behavior (ESLB) and the work effectiveness of their followers (CWEQ II) in the Tanzanian tertiary hospital (large-sized hospital). I compared it with three regional referral hospitals (medium-sized hospitals). I also learned that there were differences in ESLB and CWEQ II constructs, even after controlling for employee tenure and hospital size. I defined work effectiveness as positive work behaviors and attitudes leading to job satisfaction, commitment, low burnout, and trust. In this section, I review previous studies on servant leadership and work effectiveness and summarize their findings, the significance of the studies, and the lessons learned.

Trastek and Niles (2014) studied leadership models in healthcare and found that servant leadership was the best model for healthcare organizations because it focuses on team leadership, trust, and serving patient needs (p. 374). Under servant leadership, governments are spending many resources to minimize patient healthcare costs (Trastek & Niles, 2014, p. 375). In addition to lowering costs, healthcare personnel must increase outcomes, safety, and service (Trastek & Niles, 2014, p. 376). Healthcare personnel practicing servant leadership are also expected to extend their leadership beyond patient care to teamwork. Trastek and Niles posited that team leadership is an integral part of adequate healthcare. Leaders must nurture the development of their fellow workers and instill appropriate standards. Autonomy is needed to develop both healthcare organizations and individuals. Autonomy allows providers to build

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motivation and improve employee personal growth and effectiveness (Trastek & Niles, 2014, p. 378).

Van Winkle et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between essential servant leadership behaviors and followers' perceptions of their immediate supervisor's sense of empowerment in small-scale enterprises. Using the ESLB and CWEQ II, Van Winkle et al. found a relationship between servant leadership and empowerment and associated empowerment with work effectiveness.

According to Laschinger et al. (2001), structural empowerment includes providing opportunities to followers, which has been positively related to servant leadership. Van Winkle et al. (2014) stated that structural empowerment is associated with effective leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and effective behaviors (Kanter, 1977, 1993).

Irving and Longbotham (2007) studied the relationship between servant leadership and team effectiveness. Using the Organizational Leadership Assessment (Laub, 1999) and Team Effectiveness Questionnaire (LaFasto & Larson, 2001), they established a positive association between servant leadership and team effectiveness. Irving and Longbotham stated that the servant leadership notion of a servant intentionally means that the leader does what is best for the follower. Irving and Longbotham stated that team effectiveness has evidence as far back as 4000 B.C.; however, literature on team effectiveness only began with the work of Elton Mayo in the 20th century (Parker, 1990, p. 16), and the importance of leaders building effective teams only started with the work of Blake and Mouton (1964). From then on, Deming (1982), Furman (1995), Kuo and Yu (2009), Longbotham (2000), and Scholtes and Hacquebord (1988) promoted the importance of team effectiveness.

Access to Opportunities

Access to opportunities allows individuals to advance within the organization and develop their knowledge and skills. Employees in high-opportunity jobs are more proactive and innovative at solving challenges in their work, while those needing more opportunities are less motivated to succeed and less productive. Irving and Longbotham (2007) stated that servant leaders hold their followers accountable for reaching team goals. R. Russell and Stone (2002) posited that providing accountability is synonymous with stewardship. It involves developing others and encourages commitment and responsibility, which is related to the CWEQ II item of providing opportunities, including, among others, giving the followers challenging work and opportunities to learn new skills and new knowledge and to advance to better jobs (Irving & Longbotham, 2007; Laschinger et al., 2001).

Van Winkle et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between followers' perception of being empowered through access to opportunity, which produced a correlation of r =

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.22 (p = .02) with the perception of the supervisor's servant leadership. According to Laschinger et al. (2010), the servant leader may create opportunities for followers. However, followers may not consider it tangible or may not observe it immediately, resulting in a low perception of empowerment. Information from Trastek and Niles (2014), Van Winkle, B. et al. (2014), Irving, J. A., and Longbotham G. J. (2007) led to my first hypothesis:

H_1: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to opportunities.

Access to Resources

Access to resources is discussed regarding information as a power base and the ability to accomplish assignments. According to Kanter (1977), leaders who create environmental structures that provide information, resources, and support to their workers empower them to achieve their work. This virtue of empowerment also provides growth opportunities and shared formal and informal power (Miller & Chapman, 2001). In this sense, empowerment can either be structural (Kanter, 1977) or psychological (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

In their efforts to modify Kanter's (1977) views, Laschinger et al. (2001) stated that structural empowerment leads to psychological empowerment, which leads to positive work behaviors and attitudes (work effectiveness), rationalizing the CWEQ II instrument. For example, Laschinger et al. (2010) defined empowerment as "a response to a structurally empowering work environment" (p. 2739). This definition combines theoretical structural empowerment (Kanter, 1977) and psychological empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995).

Irving and Longbotham (2007) also supported leaders' responsibility to give support and resources to their followers. Irving and Longbotham related support and resources to achieving goals and tied this to empowerment, stating that a servant leader gives support by ensuring workers have the materials and resources needed to fulfill their goals. Irving and Longbotham's views were also supported by Patterson (2003), who equated empowerment to helping followers realize their dreams. Likewise, giving support and resources also helps to influence and empower followers (R. F. Russell, 2001).

Empowerment leads to work effectiveness and motivation (Pollard, 1996). The relationship between access to resources and their superiors' leadership behavior was studied by Van Winkle et al. (2014). Van Winkle et al. found that supervisors' servant leadership behavior produced a correlation of r = .45 (p = .00), indicating a positive relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behavior and access to resources

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such as technology, finances, or skill development. Resources are critical to accomplishing tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). This led to my second hypothesis:

H_2: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to resources.

Access to Information

Access to information is discussed as a source of power and the ability to complete tasks. According to Kanter (1977), leaders who develop environmental structures that provide information, resources, and support empower their workers to succeed. Both Van Winkle et al. (2014) and Irving and Longbotham (2007) promoted communication as another key role for a servant leader. For example, Irving and Longbotham stated that a servant leader must share their plans and goals, and that communication shows followers where the organization is heading because it provides a clear picture that guides strategies, decisions, and actions. Effective communication is also crucial in guiding an organization's vision (Irving & Longbotham, 2007). Clear communication helps followers understand organizational goals and boosts their engagement and effectiveness within the organization (Irving & Longbotham, 2007). The more information a person has, the greater their influence (Johnson & Johnson, 1991).

Carmeli et al. (2011) also found a relationship between empowerment and willingness to share information. Therefore, access to information is critical for a servant leader. Van Winkle et al. (2014) accessed information and generated a correlation of $r = .59$ ($p = .00$) between the follower's perceived empowerment and the perception of their immediate supervisor's servant leadership behavior. These results showed that there was a positive relationship between access to information and empowerment. This led to my third hypothesis:

H_3: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to information.

Access to Support

Access to support is defined as critical feedback or information that allows the follower to maximize effectiveness (Kanter, 1977). Here, support is described as information demonstrating that servant leaders consistently support their employees to reach their goals (Van Winkle et al., 2014). According to Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018), offering employees resources such as vision, purpose, and teamwork, or creating value, long-term growth, and relationships with colleagues, can lead to job engagement. This means you can create job meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990).

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In their search for the interrelationships between servant leadership, job demands, and resources, Coetzer et al. (2017) studied the views of both Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018) and Kahn (1990). Coetzer et al. found a positive relationship between servant leadership and job resources and a negative one between servant leadership and burnout. Coetzer et al. found that job resources significantly explained an increase in work engagement levels and a significant proportion of burnout reduction. Van Winkle et al. (2014) also found a positive correlation between perceived empowerment and access to support, $r = .52$ ($p = .00$). This led to my fourth hypothesis:

H_4: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to support.

Access to Formal Power

Access to formal power refers to specific characteristics such as flexibility, adaptability, creativity, decisionmaking, visibility, and the centrality of purpose and goals. Drysdale et al. (2009) called this type of power sustainable leadership focused on long-term development and consider individuals, business communities, or global markets intending to achieve welfare. By respecting value-based strategic decisions, leaders build communities and foster collaborations (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). On the other hand, Robert Greenleaf and Tom Marshal called it legitimate power (Tangen, 2019, p. 2).

Peterlin et al. (2015) conducted a study on the sustainable leadership approach to ensure its long-term sustainability. Peterlin et al. found a relationship between servant leadership and strategic decisionmaking. Further research is needed on managing relationships with various stakeholders and making influential and ethical decisions. New studies should focus on practical programs that enhance strategic decision making while reinforcing value-based leadership (Peterlin et al., 2015).

Another crucial element of formal power is creativity. Yang et al. (2017) studied servant leadership and creativity; their purpose was to explore the influence mechanism of servant leadership on employee and team creativity based on efficacy theory. Using a sample of 466 employees and 83 team leaders from 11 Chinese banks, Yang et al. found that servant leadership promotes employee creative self-efficacy and team efficiency, which leads to employee and team creativity. They suggested that managers should be encouraged to engage in servant leadership behaviors, which would improve the creative outcomes of employees.

Jaiswal and Dhar (2017) studied servant leadership's influence on trust in leaders and employee creativity. Their purpose was to investigate how servant leadership

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influences trust in leaders and how SL drives employee creativity. They found that servant leadership instills trust, which predicts employee creativity.

Van Winkle et al. (2014) found that formal power correlated at $r = .39$ ($p = .00$) with the supervisor's servant leadership behavior. Van Winkle et al. suggested that servant leaders use less institutional power to control while shifting authority to their followers. Servant leaders use formal power to empower others (Tangen, 2019). This led to my fifth hypothesis:

H_5: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived formal power.

Access to Informal Power

Informal power refers to power earned by leadership skills or personal skills such as charisma. Informal power also refers to social connections, communication, and information channels with sponsors, peers, subordinates, and cross-functional groups. Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Pablo Ruiz-Palomino (2019) called social connections social capital. The researchers studied servant leadership and wanted to learn whether it led to the development of social capital or whether it led followers to have more connections with their fellow workers, their peers, and subordinates. They also wanted to learn whether followers had known channels of communication and whether these relationships led to cross-functional growth. With a sample of 403 participants from 59 Spanish hotels, the researchers used structural equation modeling to test their hypotheses. They found that servant leadership could bond and bridge social interactions among workers, their peers, and outside their groups.

In the same way, in their study on servant leadership and empowerment, Van Winkle et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between followers' perceptions of being empowered through access to informal power. Their findings generated a correlation of $r = 23$ ($p = .01$). Despite yielding a positive outcome, Van Winkle et al. stated that informal power from servant leadership may have been overshadowed by individual follower traits and charisma, which could prevent the follower's ability to access informal power. This led to my sixth hypothesis:

H_6: When controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership and their perceived access to informal power.

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Literature on Group Comparisons

Heyns et al. (2020) compared servant leadership groups across demographic groups. The analysis in terms of group comparison was limited to age and gender. Levene's test for homogeneity was insignificant for any variables; therefore, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was done for gender groups assuming equal variance. Heyns et al. indicated that only stewardship revealed any statistical differences when comparing the means between males and females ($p < 0.01$); the male group recorded higher observations for stewardship than the female group. The remaining gender comparison was not significant. The age group test for homogeneity comparison was substantial for the age group. According to Heyns et al., multiple comparison tests were performed using ANOVA and Tamhane (equal variances were not assumed).

Özdemir and Yazici (2022) investigated the relationship between servant leadership perception and organizational cynicism and burnout among employees at the Ankara Directorate of Provincial Agriculture and Forestry. The researchers answered the differences between various demographic groups (sex, marital status, and age). Using ANOVA and the Sidak dual-comparison test, they determined the correlations between servant leadership, burnout, and cynicism levels. They found that servant leadership and burnout were negatively related, as were servant leadership and cynicism, at $p < 0.05$.

McDougle (2009) studied servant leadership in higher education, analyzing the perceptions of higher education employees regarding servant leadership practices at various institutions. She grouped her employees according to seniority and type of institution. The seniority groups were divided into management and working groups, and the institutions were represented by Urban City University and Southwest Community College. McDougle showed that the management group perceived the occurrence of servant leadership practices more frequently than the workforce group. Using ANOVA to determine the significance of the perception, McDougle found that the management group had the highest perception of job satisfaction compared to the workforce group. When comparing the differences in perceptions between the different institutions, McDougle found statistically significant differences between employees' perceptions at varying types of institutions on most dimensions of servant leadership practices.

My study compared differences in perception of servant leadership as well as work effectiveness constructs, while utilizing tenure and hospital size as control variables for the research hypotheses. For the research questions, my study used tenure as the control variable and hospital size as the independent variable. The following are the research questions:

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RQ1: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perception of servant leadership by hospital size?

RQ2: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived access to opportunity by hospital size?

RQ3: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived access to resources by hospital size?

RQ4: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived access to information by hospital size?

RQ5: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived access to support by hospital size?

RQ6: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived formal power by hospital size?

RQ7: When controlling for tenure, is there a difference in nurses' perceived informal power by hospital size?

Methodology

In this study, I employed a quantitative nonexperimental and descriptive methodology to determine the relationship between supervisors' servant leadership behavior and the work effectiveness of their followers in the Tanzanian public hospitals to learn if there were differences in ESLB and CWEQ II constructs by hospital size. Work effectiveness refers to positive work behaviors and attitudes, leading to job satisfaction, commitment, and trust. Data analysis utilized hierarchical regressions to test the hypotheses and an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for the research questions.

Sampling

This study used a purposive sampling method. A convenient sample of 110 out of the anticipated 100 participants was collected using the snowball method from the estimated total number of nurses in the participating hospitals (2,000), comprising 1,000 from the tertiary hospital and 1,000 from three regional referral hospitals in Dar es Salaam. This was a 10% increase in the number of participants. I applied a 1:1 design, or at least 50 participants for each hospital group size. The number of 100 participants is a convenient sample generated using the minimum sample size formula for hierarchical regression derived from Hair et al. (2019) and the minimum sample for ANCOVA. Hair et al. stated that the sample size for hierarchical regression depends on the number of predictors in the study. I had three predictors; thus, my sample size for the regression

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model was $N = 3 \times 20 = 60$ (Hair et al., 2019). The study had two control variables and one independent variable, making three predictors.

For ANCOVA, I calculated the sample size using GPower with an effect size of 0.40 (which allows for the detection of large effects). For alpha = .05 and statistical power = .80, given the two hospital size groups and the one covariate (tenure), the total sample size I needed was 64. Thus, I had at least 50 respondents per hospital size, resulting in a total of 110. This sample size also covered the minimum sample for a balanced ANCOVA.

An open invitation was sent to the hospital directors, and they gave a letter confirming their consent. After the hospital approval, I used the snowball method to reach the eligible participants. The research tools consisted of the ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, 2015) and the CWEQ II questionnaire (Laschinger et al., 2001) in English and Swahili. Back translation was used to translate the tools from English to Swahili.

The surveys were composed of five Likert-like questions ranging from *not at all* (1) to *often* (5) for the ESLB and *none* (1) to *a lot* (5) for the CWEQ II. Furthermore, the surveys included basic demographic questions, including gender, age, and tenure. There were 30 male and 79 female participants, while one participant was missing. The predominant age group was 31–50 years old (50.9%), while the 18–30 and 51–60 age groups formed 23.6% each, respectively. The mean for tenure was 9.86 with a standard deviation of 7.61. I visited the various hospitals and issued hard-copy surveys for those who consented to participate. The participants' nursing categories included nursing practitioners, registered nurses, diploma holders, and certificate holders.

Instrumentation

The current study used the ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, 2015) and the CWEQ II (Laschinger et al., 2001). I used the ESLB to measure servant leadership observable behavior (independent variable) and the CWEQ II to measure the followers' sense of their leader's bureaucratic behaviors, as detailed in the research questions and hypotheses (dependent variable).

I measured servant leadership using the ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, 2015). The ESLB was chosen for its simplicity and reliability. Nine scales using ESLB have demonstrated test–retest reliability, with Cronbach's alpha scores ranging from .92 to .98, indicating strong scale reliability, and Pearson's *r*, ranging from .83 to .91, demonstrating strong validity. The instrument was designed to measure behaviors unique to servant leaders, and its questions address behaviors easily observed by followers.

For example, the follower is asked about the perception that the leader practices what they preach and about the leader seeing the mission as a responsibility to others. The

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ESLB was used as a global instrument with 10 questions that followers used to rate the behaviors of their immediate supervisors on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *definitely no* to *definitely yes*. An example of a question follows: "The leader practices what she preaches, sees serving as a mission of responsibility to others, and seeks to instill truth rather than fear of insecurity."

I measured the conditions of work effectiveness using the CWEQ II (Laschinger et al., 2001) I chose the CWEQ II because it extends the Hackman and Oldham job characteristics model (Garg & Rastogi, 2006, p. 576), which opens the notion of critical psychological states, such as experienced meaningfulness (skill variety, task identity, and task significance), experienced responsibility for the outcome of the work (autonomy), and the knowledge of actual results of work activities. The CWEQ II is a global instrument with six items. According to Laschinger et al., structural empowerment refers to the structure of power in the workplace that comes from three primary sources: (a) access to information, (b) access to support, and (c) access to resources required for realizing organizational goals; the other three items in CWEQ II are (d) access to opportunity, (e) access to formal power, and (f) access to informal power. I chose the CWEQ II because it has shown consistent validity of Pearson $r = .56$ and Cronbach's alpha scores of reliability ranging from .67 to .89 when CWEQ II was correlated with a global measure of empowerment (Laschinger et al., 2001).

According to Laschinger et al. (2001), access to opportunity refers to the opportunity for growth and movement within the organization, and to increase knowledge and skills. Access to resources relates to acquiring the financial means, materials, time, and supplies required to do the work. Access to information refers to having the formal and informal knowledge necessary to be effective in the workplace (technical knowledge and expertise needed to accomplish the job, and an understanding of organizational policies and decisions). Access to support involves receiving feedback and guidance from subordinates, peers, and superiors. Access to formal power is derived from specific job characteristics such as flexibility, adaptability, and creativity associated with discretionary decision making, visibility, and centrality to organizational purpose and goals. Access to informal power is derived from developing social connections, communication, and information channels with sponsors, peers, subordinates, and cross-functional groups (Kanter, 1977, 1993). The CWEQ II was initially designed to measure nurses' sense of bureaucratic behaviors; therefore, it fit nicely in a hospital environment (Laschinger et al., 2001).

Data Collection

I collected data ($N = 110$) using snowball and direct personal contact with participants. Hard copies were used to survey the nurses at their hospital sites. Out of the 110 participants, 56 (50.9%) were from Group 1 (the large stand-alone hospital), and 54

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(49.1%) were from Group 2 (the three medium-sized referral hospitals). The participant age groups were 31–50 (50.9%), 18–30 (23.6%), and 51–60 (23.6%). The participant gender was 30% male and 79% female; 1% was missing.

To collect data, an open letter of invitation was first sent to the hospital directors requesting their consent, followed by the snowball method to reach the eligible participants. The survey tools included the consent to participate and paper-based formats of the ESLB scale (Winston & Fields, 2015) and the CWEQ II questionnaire (Laschinger et al., 2001) in English and Swahili. Back translation was used to translate from English to Swahili.

Results

I employed hierarchal regression in my hypotheses to show whether servant leadership as a global construct (independent variable), while controlling for tenure and hospital size, explains a statistically significant amount of variance in each of the six CWEQ II items (dependent variables) of opportunity, resources, information, support, formal power, and informal power (Hair et al., 2019). For the research questions, I used ANCOVA to show the differences between servant leadership and the CWEQ II variables by hospital size while using employee tenure as the covariate and hospital size as the independent variable.

Hierarchal Regression

I used hierarchical regression to explore the relationships between servant leadership using the ESLB and CWEQ constructs while using tenure and hospital size as control variables. These were three predictors regressed against the corresponding dependent variable item of CWEQ II (Hair et al., 2019). As predictors, the two control variables were entered first. In the second step of the hierarchical regression, the independent variable ESLB was entered as the third predictor. The dependent variable items of CWEQ II were numeric, and the independent variable (servant leadership) and the control variable (employee tenure) were also numeric. However, the control variable, hospital size, was categorical (Hair et al., 2019). Tenure was specified in terms of years and months to provide continuous data and was rounded to years in service (Hair et al., 2019).

Using hierarchical regression, I tested the hypotheses to determine whether a two-step hierarchical regression collectively demonstrates that, when controlling for tenure and hospital size, there is a positive relationship between nurses' perception of servant leadership, as measured by the ESLB, and their perceived access to one of the CWEQ II constructs. The null hypothesis follows:

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H_0: Controlling for tenure and hospital size variables does not significantly improve the prediction of the relationship between servant leadership (the independent variable) and the CWEQ II construct (dependent variable).

The results of my study indicated that the null hypothesis for each output variable, which stated that controlling for employee tenure and hospital size does not significantly improve the prediction of the CWEQ II dependent variables, was rejected. Significant relationships between servant leadership (independent variable) and CWEQ II dimensions (dependent variables) were observed in the R^2 results ($R^2 = 0.50$ for access to resources, $R^2 = 0.44$ for access to information, and $R^2 = 0.51$ for access to support), indicating a moderate servant leadership explanation for the outcome variables. For access to opportunities, formal and informal power, the R^2 explained less than 30% of the variability in opportunities, formal and informal power. On the contrary, standardized beta (β) coefficients showed a moderate to strong influence between the predictor and outcome variables. For example, in Hypothesis 2, access to resources (outcome) would change by 60% for every one-unit predicted change in servant leadership (predictor) after controlling for hospital size and tenure.

ANCOVA

The research questions were tested to show differences in perception of servant leadership and CWEQ II constructs by hospital size, tenure being the covariate, while hospital size was the independent variable.

The ESLB and the CWEQ II constructs were the dependent variables, one at a time. A balanced design (at least 50 per hospital size group) ensured an appropriate sample size (Hair et al., 2019). The research questions asked whether there was a significant difference in nurses' perception of the output variable by hospital size while using tenure as the covariate and hospital size as the independent variable. The results were that the nurses perceived statistically significant differences for all the dependent variables, including servant leadership, access to resources, information, support, and formal and informal power by hospital size, except for access to opportunities, which yielded a $p = 0.19$. The results suggest that there are perceived statistically significant differences in access to the output variables by hospital size, except for access to opportunities.

Discussion

Contribution to the Scholarly Literature

This study is the first known servant leadership study in the Tanzanian healthcare system. The study adds to the body of knowledge and covers the gap in leadership theory and practice. The study dealt with the inquiry about the existence of specific

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behaviors required of a servant leader and how they influence structural and psychological empowerment. The result of my study supports the existence of servant leadership in a selection of public hospitals in Tanzania, confirming that servant leadership is a theory with unique behaviors understood by both leaders and their followers and is consistent with Winston and Fields' (2015) study, which confirmed that there are essential behaviors required of servant leaders and that these behaviors can be measured with a scale.

This study is also consistent with the findings of Chandaruba (2019), who postulated that Tanzanian leaders showed interest in adopting a new type of leadership that emphasizes shared goals for both personal and organizational benefits. Likewise, the results are consistent with van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011), who stated that servant leadership is best for organizations that are focusing on improving the welfare of their followers, including a dutiful approach to work, power sharing, giving a voice, as well as developing a long-run performance perspective.

Practical Recommendations Based on Theoretical Findings

Servant leadership has been associated with healthcare and found to provide the best models for healthcare organizations because of its focus on team leadership, trust, and patient care (Trastek & Niles, 2014). Therefore, I recommend that health organizations in Tanzania employ leaders who practice servant leadership behaviors, and as posited by Chandaruba (2019), Tanzania could also focus on training aspiring leaders to develop behaviors associated with servant leadership. These behaviors have been measured and confirmed to bring about work effectiveness. Work effectiveness has been associated with providing opportunities, resources, and support, including formal and informal power. Effective work environments would also help organizations solve work-related problems associated with job satisfaction, commitment, burnout, and intentions to quit.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The sample size for this study was 110 participants, which was 110%. The large sample size improves the reliability of the study results. However, the weakness of the sample is that it was mainly composed of females, with only a few male participants (79% female and 30% male). The ratio of male-to-female participation may have influenced the study results. The study was also originally intended to include another region (Pwani) and to include a third layer of hospital size (the small or district hospitals), but the plan did not materialize.

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Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies should replicate this study for generalization and include not only public but also private and nongovernmental organizations in all the regions of Tanzania. This means it should also include hospitals in the whole United Republic of Tanzania. My original study area had included a three-tier hospital level, including the main hospitals, the regional referral hospitals, and the district hospitals, but I was not able to go that far. An evaluation of the whole hospital system may give better results and allow generalization of findings. The study should also be done in other countries to provide comparable data.

Conclusions

The current study focused on the relationship between nurses' perceptions of their immediate supervisors' servant leadership behaviors and their sense of work effectiveness in a selection of Tanzanian public hospitals. I utilized servant leadership theory, which has its roots in Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf proposed that leaders adopt a servant position in their relationships with their followers. In analyzing servant leadership behaviors, I utilized the ESLB (Winston & Fields, 2015). I used the CWEQ II (Laschinger et al., 2001) to assess work effectiveness. Winston and Fields (2015) stated that the ESLB provides a psychometrically valid approach for gauging leaders' servant leadership behaviors and shows a strong relationship between ESLB and the followers' judgment on outcomes, such as job satisfaction, trust, and low burnout, which are characteristics measured by the CWEQ II. I also chose CWEQ II because it was specifically made to measure nurses' perception of their direct supervisor's bureaucratic behaviors. The CWEQ II has also been proven to be valid and reliable, which fits the purpose of this study.

Data analysis used hierarchical regression for testing hypotheses and an ANCOVA for answering research questions. The study results suggest that there are perceived positive relationships between servant leadership and work effectiveness in Tanzania. Still, there are challenges regarding access to resources, support, information, and formal and informal power between hospital groups. Regarding access to opportunities, there were no statistically significant differences by hospital size.

Tanzania has shown interest in adopting servant leadership (Chandaruba, 2019). This study is the first known servant leadership study in the Tanzanian hospital system. It helps to close the gap in servant leadership theory and practice. Additional studies are recommended to include other regions of Tanzania and elsewhere in the world. Using qualitative and mixed methods and other instruments for analyzing servant leadership and work effectiveness is also recommended.

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About the Author

Dr. Gladness E. Mtango is a graduate in Business Leadership and Organization at Regent University. She authored a chapter in *Arise and Shine, Vol. 1: Stories of 32 Suji Mission Schools Alumni*, edited by B. Elineema Kangalu et al. (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Interpak Books, 2015), she also wrote a RRR2023 article titled *The Perceived Relationships Between Servant Leadership and Organizational Commitment in The Southeastern and Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Jacksonville, Florida*. Her recently completed doctoral dissertation is titled *The Nurses' Perception of Their Immediate Supervisors' Servant Leadership Behaviors and Their Sense of Work Effectiveness in a Selection of Dar es Salaam Public Hospitals of Tanzania*. Her research interests are servant leadership, e-learning, and total quality management.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to**:**

Gladness Mtango, 5465 Selton Avenue, Jacksonville, FL, 32277 or **mk200784@gmail.com**

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Controlled Discipline: A Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Meekness and Its Application Among Entrepreneurial Leaders

Wesley R. Stewart
Regent University
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Abstract

Meekness is often misunderstood and confusing when applied in highly challenging, dynamic environments. For entrepreneurial leaders, the construct of a leadership strategy that incorporates virtues is frequently low on the list of priorities for business ventures and intraorganizational initiatives (Ciulla, 2020). However, the lack of an intentional and clear leadership strategy can undermine entrepreneurial endeavors, as much of a startup's success relies on the often-small cadre of professionals who work to achieve a vision amid the unique risks facing new ventures (Badura et al., 2020; Venus et al., 2019). This conceptual study examines meekness as a potential virtue that entrepreneurial leaders can adopt and embody as they strive to inspire and motivate followers to achieve a shared vision of success and realize their full potential. A qualitative analysis of recent literature on meekness in business and entrepreneurial endeavors, as well as biblical profiles in which meekness is contrasted with success and failure, was used to examine the holistic impact on follower outcomes. For biblical references, socio-rhetorical analysis of inter-texture was applied to ensure theological consistency with the biblical definition of meekness and its outcomes for both Moses and David. The study concludes with an examination of the rhetorical value of meekness as a virtue in entrepreneurial leadership strategy. It demonstrates the need for further research on the impact of meekness as a potential moderator of employee motivation and business outcomes in entrepreneurial ventures.

Keywords: meekness, leadership, strategy, entrepreneurial, virtue

The beatitudes include the opening line, "Blessed are…" nine times in a repetitive pattern that the original audience would have been familiar with and one that Jesus likely used to emphasize the singular quality of persons who embody each of the associated attributes; they are blessed (*English Standard Version*, 2001/2016). The beatitudes outline the ethical guidelines for a godly life and provide a framework for assessing individuals' behaviors and intentions (Longman et al., 2010). The principles

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therein are not limited to those who ascribe to a Judeo-Christian worldview but can be found emulated throughout society on the spectrum of foundational morality, even among secular ethicists (Davies, 2016; Rotaru, 2023). Secular literature is replete with beatific mores taught in both practical and theoretical contexts, and the very definitions of the terms: meekness, humility, peace, and moral righteousness have their roots in theological imagery and in externally applied moral law (Barnat, 2017; Mourão Permoser, 2019; Westermarck, 2022).

Winston (2002) described meekness as an often-abhorred virtue among secular leaders that is misunderstood and misapplied. In Matthew 5:5, Jesus stated, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The term used in the Bible to connote meekness in Hebrew, *anaw* refers to the bearing of a burden or persistence under trial, while the Greek term *praus* refers to disciplined calm or exercising strength under God's control (Bible Hub, 2022; Caner, 2010; Green, 2005). The qualities of meekness are illuminated by the original languages in which they appeared, such as demonstrating persistence and controlled calm in the face of burdens or challenges. The beatific reference to meekness does not expound on the qualities of the virtue. Still, it does declare that those who are meek will inherit the earth, where "earth" is an allusion to the Kingdom of Heaven and "inheritance" is an operative term for actualizing a promise akin to entering into a promised land (Barker & Kohlenberger, 2004). The parallel between meekness and humbleness in the beatitudes is demonstrated in the characteristics that embody them. In Matthew 5:3, Jesus extols the virtue of a spirit of poverty, in which the individual relies solely on God. Similarly, in Luke 6:20, the allusion to poverty is explicitly in the context of economic poverty, whereas in Matthew 5, the allusion is often translated to mean spiritual poverty or a state of complete reliance regardless of external wealth (Barker & Kohlenberger, 2004; Orr, 2019).

On its face, as a virtue, meekness seems to fit with the operational definitions of multiple leadership theories and styles, not least of which would be servant, transformational, authentic, democratic, and ethical leadership (Bourantas & Agapitou, 2016; Nawaz & Khan, 2016; Newstead et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of research on meekness as a virtue for leadership behavior and efficacy, particularly in private businesses and among entrepreneurs. Given the operating definition of meekness provided herein and its general application as both a virtue and a behavior in the Bible, this study explores the potential of meekness as a virtue in entrepreneurial leadership strategies, laying the foundation for employee engagement, motivation, and corporate performance. For this study, discipline and humility are used as subordinate traits of meekness and are associated with the term as components of the behaviors exhibited by meek leaders. Therefore, discipline is the quality of persistence and diligence in accomplishing a goal regardless of the environment or circumstances (Robertson, 2020). Humility is defined as a leader's competency in self-awareness of limitations, ownership of failures, willingness to learn and accept advice, and openness with

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employees regardless of echelon (Maldonado et al., 2018). These definitions are analyzed against the backdrop of scholarly literature on meekness and leadership virtues, as well as biblical examples of meek leaders, to provide a framework for future research into the impact and value of this virtue in planning and executing leadership strategies for entrepreneurs.

Literature Review

Meekness in Leadership

Much of the scholarly literature on meekness in leadership has focused on the biblical quality outside secular contexts, primarily in church and non-profit leadership studies (Crowther, 2017; Halstead, 2021; Molyneaux, 2003; Smurthwaite, 2011). Literature on meekness as a leadership trait in entrepreneurial ventures is even more scant, with most references to meekness used as a synonym for discipline, constancy, humility, and gentleness as positive leadership traits for comprehensive leadership styles (Bocarnea, 2018; Botha & Morallane, 2019; Kujanpää, 2022; Sanz-Bas, 2023). Traditionally, meekness has been associated with the servant, authentic, transformational, and altruistic leadership styles where the trait is integrated into a formal theoretical construct as a factor in follower development and organizational well-being (Byrd & Thornton, 2019; Mallén et al., 2019; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Where these leadership styles are associated with entrepreneurial contexts, the quality of meekness is often used as a determinant of a leader's competency in each style or as a moderator in leader-person fit to aid organizational culture development (Caesar, 2014; Ferch, 2005; Fernando, 2007; Oc et al., 2020).

Winston (2002) provided a cogent assessment of each beatific virtue in organizational leadership by invoking their imperative nature as constituent elements of a holistic, positive leadership ethos. Regarding meekness, Winston noted the term is often associated with a general perception of weakness or passivity. He stated that modern leadership across organizational types "abhors" the term and sees it as anathema to the concept of toughness touted as necessary for competent leadership (p. 41). However, the dynamic of meekness as a trait of ineffective and feckless leaders is challenged when defined through its biblical conceptual framework. Winston described meekness as "controlled discipline" (p. 46). He noted that meekness equips leaders to make difficult decisions that may require toughness through rational, data-centric, humane processes of understanding and emotional discipline. This early work embodies meekness from a position of moral and personal strength, promoting self-control and enriching interactions, regardless of their tenor or impetus. Winston further described how meekness is a quality that contains the means to most ends, whereby leaders who exhibit controlled discipline can make, communicate, and execute difficult decisions and diffuse organizational challenges by demonstrating an inherent quality of care for

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individuals and organizations without indulging emotional and reactionary impulses and, thus, set a model for similar behaviors among subordinates, peers, and superiors.

The concept of meekness as a leadership virtue was expanded by Molyneaux (2003) through a pragmatic study of the virtue, considering an evolving interest in leadership qualities that extend beyond tactile and methodological constructs. The literature review included the socio-rhetorical application of Matthew 5:5 as a contravention to the popular concept that meekness implies a leader's foregoing power, but that it genuinely means controlled power. Molyneaux concluded that meek leaders can respond to challenges rather than react and are equipped with the ability to aggressively address issues ranging from misconduct, shortfalls, and structural impositions with poise and precision. He associated his analysis of Matthew 5:6 with Comte-Sponville and Temerson (2002), who posited a moral philosophy of meekness as a virtue for human interaction, particularly in leadership contexts. While Molyneaux (2003) did not explicitly disassociate the biblical principle of meekness from its secular application, he did pave the way for the concept of meekness as a humane virtue among leaders, irrespective of their worldviews.

Knights and O'Leary (2006) further developed this concept by applying it to historically relevant cases of ethical violations in business. They conducted a semi-structured meta-narrative of the literature on leadership ethics against the backdrop of multiple scandals in the financial and equities trading sectors, with references spanning a multimodal qualitative analysis of case studies, phenomena, and linguistic logic. The study's findings demonstrated a correlation between a lack of leader morality and unethical behaviors that led to highly publicized business failures, scandals, and structural flaws in market regulations. They concluded that ethical frameworks were imperative to organizational success, that leaders are the stewards—if not instigators—of these frameworks, and that meekness via the combination of humility and poise (control or discipline) increased the potential for ethical financial decisions when faced with unethical options.

Pettigrove (2012) contributed to the body of knowledge by presenting a qualitative article grounded in elements of grounded theory, exploring the applicability of meekness as a predominant moral virtue for leaders, and providing an explanatory dematerialization of the term and its connotations. Relying heavily on the classical definitions of meekness from the original Greek word πραΰς (praus), Pettigrove provided a logical argument for the constituent qualities of meekness among leaders and their pervasiveness as valid means of disciplined decision-making and conflict management. The use of meekness, thus, is rooted in the concept of gentleness and humility but combined with the fortitude of integrity and moral imperative of ethical behavior, which in turn presents a vision of leaders who act ethically with gentleness

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but are unwavering in their convictions which can manifest as assertiveness and stability much in the way Jesus is depicted when he cleared the temple in Matthew.

Harris (2013) presented a conceptual framework for a term dubbed *humbition*, in which new leaders embody meekness when taking over preexisting teams while maintaining their ambitions for career advancement. The study highlighted the need to disentangle the negative cultural presumptions that often accompany ambition among leaders, particularly female leaders, from the requirement for humility when assuming a leadership role in an organization with low or nonexistent social capital. Ultimately, this study demonstrated the theoretical value of meekness among ambitious leaders and a potential, albeit not empirically validated, moderator for unbridled personal advancement and inconsistent resolve in early team acclimation phases. The study provided a conceptual foundation for disciplined leader-follower social responsibility within organizations, in which meekness sets a tone of consistency, intentionality, and deliberative decision-making that can be modeled and embodied by the entire workforce.

Crowther (2017) proposed what is possibly the first values-based leadership model, grounded in biblical virtues and the fruits of the Spirit outlined in Galatians 5:22–23, with meekness as a core virtue of the construct. Crowther's model included meekness as a moderator of relationships in leader-to-follower dynamics, imbuing the leader with moral authority through calmness and self-discipline in challenging circumstances. Thus, meekness is used here as a structural element, much like a pillar that works in concert with eight other virtues to embody the definition of a holistic, biblically moral leader. Crowther demonstrated the value of meekness in resolving conflicts, making difficult ethical and responsible decisions, and maintaining harmony in the face of challenges. This study, along with its associations between meekness and a leader's capacity to maintain emotional and mental discipline in any situation, demonstrates the need for empirical data on the quality as a moderator of organizational culture and individual responsibility. Further, Crowther demonstrated the inherent applicability of biblically centered value systems to non-religious contexts and the validity of meekness as a virtue among secular and non-secular leaders.

Gist (2020) argued for a broader empirical analysis of the virtue of leader humility as a moderator and potential indicator of employee dissatisfaction beyond tangible benefits and career opportunities. The concept presented highlights the need for more qualitative and quantitative analysis of how followers perceive leader humility and whether a lack of humility among leaders is correlated with employees' desire to leave corporations and pursue other opportunities. Employee motivation is at the core of the conceptual framework, and Gist provides a strong theoretical argument for how new employees and tenured staff alike are affected by a leader's ability to demonstrate discipline and deference in their decision-making, which maintains employee well-

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being as a top concern for company longevity and market relevance. While this study did not address meekness outright, it did provide a factorial framework for the characteristics of meekness in its operating definition of humility to call on researchers to produce validated analysis on whether humility, deference, discipline, compassion, and intellectual honesty play a role in attracting and retaining employees among business startups and established corporations with exploratory analysis in leader humility and meekness as the justification (Gist, 2020; Ren et al., 2020; Subrahmanyam, 2018).

Halstead (2021) took an inverted approach to studying the impact of meekness on leadership efficacy by analyzing the level of cognitive dissonance among followers who identified anger as a negative quality in leaders. The study included a phenomenological review of scenarios contrasting leaders' tendencies toward anger or meekness and the potential impacts each has on employees' cognitive dissonance between their functional jobs and their commitment to the overarching organization. Halstead used biblical baselines from Matthew 5:5, Matthew 11:29, Colossians 3:12, and Titus 3:1–2 for the definition and practical application of meekness as exemplars that framed the model of meekness and provided substantive contrasts to undisciplined expressions of anger among leaders as de facto modes of negative motivation. He concluded that there is a substantive connection between the affective and cognitive domains of human emotion that amplify human reactions to leader anger, with equally adverse outcomes for organizations, manifested in employee disengagement or in employee anger that amplifies and propagates a culture of anger and undisciplined reactions among the workforce.

Virtues in Leadership Strategy

There is scant research on meekness in leadership strategies among private enterprises. Research on entrepreneurial leadership strategies that emphasize meekness or humility as virtues is almost nonexistent. However, a body of knowledge does exist that associates meekness and humility with employee motivation, including new employees and new organizations that demonstrate the value of virtues in leadership strategies (Caldwell et al., 2015; Flynn, 2008; Ozkan & Ardic, 2022; Tsoukas, 2018; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). From the literature on leadership virtues and their strategic implications for developing and leading businesses, the characteristics of meekness arise as elemental to ensuring employee engagement, increasing business efficacy, and promoting corporate longevity outside of the structural factors and variables—often in the face of challenges they pose (Arjoon, 2000; Glauner, 2017; Maldonado et al., 2018; Tsoukas, 2018; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Research on leader discipline and self-control augments this body of knowledge by contrasting leader impact and corporate responsibility and by conducting multiple exploratory studies on the effects of leader discipline on corporate culture and outcomes (McCarter et al., 2022).

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Discipline and Humility: Antecedents to Leadership Strategy. Discipline has been studied as a factor in employee performance and organizational efficacy for centuries and is referenced in the early writings of Stoics, political philosophers, and classical theorists (Robertson, 2020; Russell, 2015; Stephenson, 1959). Scholarly literature on the application of discipline in business contexts, particularly business-leader contexts, has focused heavily on the role of performance and execution discipline in organizations, with less emphasis on discipline as a virtue versus a behavioral trait among leaders (Aeni & Kuswanto, 2021). Tumilaar (2015) conducted a quantitative analysis, including classic assumption tests and multiple linear regression, to examine the relationships among employee performance, leader motivation, discipline, and the success of private businesses in Indonesia. They determined that discipline is a behavioral norm that can be cultivated through corporate citizenship programs and that leaders positively impact employee discipline when they model desired behaviors rather than dictate them.

Razak et al. (2018) found that a leader's personal work discipline had a corollary effect on employee modeling of disciplined behaviors, leading to measurable improvements in business performance. They conducted a quantitative analysis of data collected from Indonesian businesses. Correlation, determination, and simultaneous and partial sample testing showed that leader self-discipline could be used as an indicator of organizational performance consistency and as a baseline for employee motivation when tangible benefit variables were accounted for. McCarter et al. (2022) conducted a similar analysis among hospitality employees in Texas and found that leadership style, including traits associated with meekness, positively affected employee discipline. Specifically, they concluded that leader work discipline had the highest impact on employee work discipline as a moderator for performance, and that leader work discipline, conjoined with elements of authentic, transformational, and transactional leadership styles, was the most significant predictor of employee motivation among the sample set. Suhartono et al. (2023) conducted a study among Indonesian steel manufacturing employees and reported similar results. Notably, employee performance was directly correlated with a culture of work discipline, attributed to leader self-discipline and the maintenance of organizational protocols, most notably through the paradigm of transactional leadership.

Vera and Rodriguez-Lopez (2004) advanced a conceptual argument for humility as a fundamental quality of leaders, defining it as a virtue and citing multiple studies correlating humility with success across various environments (Farson & Keys, 2002; Hayward & Hambrick, 1997; Solomon, 1999). They concluded that leader humility is tied to corporate success in both practical business scenarios and organizational longevity, as well as cultural well-being among employees. Their findings demonstrated that humility, defined as accurate self-knowledge, realism, a propensity to learn, and self-discipline among leaders, has a positive impact on organizational learning, employee resilience, a service-oriented culture, firm performance, and

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longevity (Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). Owens and Hekman (2016) expanded on this analysis through a quantitative analysis of the impact of leader humility on team interactions, emergence, performance, and outcomes. Their study included samples from 607 employees across multiple industries, using a double-blind design with 84 laboratory and 77 organizational field teams (Owens & Hekman, 20165, p. 1106). The authors concluded that leader humility provides a strategic advantage by preventing employee cultural contagion through demotivated behaviors and destructive attitudes, and by enhancing the quality of both team performance and corporate engagement, with validated correlations to business success.

Recent literature on humility among business leaders emphasizes the value of virtuous leadership strategies and their impact on organizational culture, business performance, and social responsibility. Maldonado et al. (2018) conducted a study that identified six organizational behavior norms, including humility, exemplified by leaders who are almost synonymous with the operating definition of meekness, namely employee development, failure tolerance, organizational transparency, awareness, performance recognition, and corporate openness Kelemen et al. (2023) synthesized a substantial amount of literature on leader humility. They emphasized the value of virtue-oriented leadership strategies, incorporating humility and elements of meekness as pillars that support both internal organizational health and external impact. Their analysis included nomological and theoretical frameworks of leader humility. It demonstrated the operational definition of meekness espoused by Winston (2002), which involves controlled discipline as a precursor to humble and altruistic leadership, with direct correlations to organizational performance (Kelemen et al., 2023). Most literature associating virtues with leadership strategy highlights humility as fundamental. It dematerializes this virtue to constituent behaviors, qualities, and skills that repeatedly demonstrate the qualities of meekness as elemental to humility. Thus, while there is scant literature on meekness as a virtue of leadership in business contexts, a growing body of foundational literature on humility paves the way for future research on meekness specifically, as well as for identifying the differences between the two as independent and interdependent elements of a holistic leadership strategy.

Analysis

Biblical Contrasts of Meekness

Throughout the Bible, there are multiple examples of meekness in leadership, and equally, if not more, examples of leaders who failed to demonstrate it. Two examples of leaders who both failed and succeeded at demonstrating meekness are Moses and David (Halstead, 2021; Molyneaux, 2003). Herein, each will be considered in the context of their ability to apply controlled discipline against scenarios where they failed.

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Moses

Moses was raised in the courts of Pharaoh after being miraculously saved by Pharaoh's decree that Hebrew midwives must kill any male child born to Hebrew women (Exodus 1). He was given every opportunity that a princely leader could imagine, as he was groomed in diplomacy, military command, and the execution of power (Exodus 2). The biblical narrative provides an image of uncontrolled discipline and a clear point of growth in maturity for Moses as a young man before he assumes his calling to lead Israel's freedom. In Exodus 2:11–14, Moses enters a scene in which an Egyptian commits an injustice against a fellow Hebrew. To this point, Moses has watched and learned how the Egyptians forced the Hebrews to conduct hard labor with little to no reprieve and oppressed God's people to build Pharaoh's vision of an unrivaled kingdom. His moral anger was likely a motivator for his actions as he responded to the injustice played out before him by murdering the Egyptian slave master (Carpenter, 2012). The Hebrews immediately rebuked Moses's actions, in a likely unexpected turn, and questioned his leadership. The next day when Moses comes upon two Hebrews embroiled in an argument, and in his attempt to understand and settle the conflict, he is rebuked by one of the men who says, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exodus 2:13–14). In his haste to address a wrongdoing and exact his own form of discipline, Moses undermined his authority among Hebrews and Egyptians and fled the country to avoid Pharaoh's justice (Kaiser, 2017). Then, Moses embarked on a journey that would shape him as a leader and ultimately lead to his return to Egypt as God's deliverer for the Hebrews.

Throughout Exodus, Moses demonstrates the human condition of conflict between faith and doubt, self-control and unrestrained emotion, obedience and defiance. However, a recurring theme of meekness emerges in the process whereby Moses submits himself to God's power and executes his charge to confront the impetuous Pharaoh with the demand to free the Hebrews. Moses's meekness prevails over his self-doubt in Exodus 4, when God provides Aaron as a spokesman for Moses's mission. Again, Moses demonstrates restraint and controlled discipline when proving to the Hebrews that he is God's deliverer of their freedom, as seen in Exodus 4, 5, 12, 14, 15, and 16. It is meekness that is underpinned by faith that Moses employs when executing God's will and the declaration of each plague on Egypt. Moses showed controlled discipline not only in giving Pharaoh God's ultimatum but also by doing exactly as commanded rather than taking matters into his own hands to either negotiate with Pharaoh or exact a more immediate plan of action (Carpenter, 2012).

David

As a leader, David was blessed and anointed by God from an early age. In 1 Samuel 16, God commands the prophet to anoint David, the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, and not

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the most prominent in terms of stature, outward appearance, or bearing. However, David was declared to be "glowing with health" and of "fine appearance and handsome" (1 Samuel 16:12). He was still the least of Jesse's sons and, at the time, a shepherd of Jesse's flocks (. While David was not expected to be the anointed one based on his age and position in the family, God used him, from a presumably lowly state, to be the successor to King Saul and the leader of Israel. From this humble beginning, David would rise and fall and rise again as a leader who embodied and violated the tenets of meekness, among other prominent godly virtues (Benton, 2016).

Early in David's life, he shows remarkable meekness in the face of overwhelming odds. At his father's command, David visits his elder brothers, who are encamped at the battlefront against the Philistines, to bring them food (1 Samuel 17:17–18). His actual task, however, was to demonstrate God's power in the face of an insurmountable challenge by humbly accepting God's charge to face down the giant Goliath with a sling and stones, leading to Goliath's death and the Israelite conquest over the Philistine army (Hoffner, 2015; Longman & Garland, 2010). Here, David demonstrated meekness as he employed the controlled discipline of God's power through faith and obedience, setting the example for God's omnipotence where human capability and capacity failed. David would go on to experience many trials and victories throughout his life, demonstrating the caprices of human nature, both succeeding and failing in his pursuit of meekness.

In 2 Samuel 11, the Bible portrays David at a particularly low point in his moral character, abandoning his kingly duties and remaining at his palace while his army is off fighting (Longman & Garland, 2010). David demonstrates a lack of self-control and a failure of self-discipline by choosing to rest and remain idle while his men were fighting the enemies of Israel. Instead, he sends his representative, Joab, to oversee the military campaign. Longman and Garland (2010) noted that David's actions were unusual for a ruler of his time, but they also opened the door for reprehensible, sinful behavior. Thus, although his army enjoyed a decisive victory over the Amorites, David's lack of meekness in the face of his responsibility led to greater sin. Immediately thereafter, the story of David's lechery with Bathsheba unfolds and can be concluded as a direct consequence of his abdication of duty (Cloyd, 2019; Hoffner, 2015). While various other virtues are jettisoned in this image of David's failure, the operating definition of meekness is appropriate as a factor in analyzing his behavior. David demonstrated a lack of discipline, which led to a more significant lack of control and, thus, resulted in selfish behaviors that followed, including adultery, murder, and deceit (Hoffner, 2015).

While David ultimately repents for his sins and endures the consequences they created, he also demonstrates a growth progression in pervasive meekness throughout his life. This is evidenced in a seemingly simple exchange that any leader seeking to learn and apply meekness can easily emulate. As David flees the pursuit of his son Absalom, who

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was set on killing the anointed king, he is confronted with one of his many failures by Shimei, a man from Saul's clan, who curses David for the deaths attributed to his actions. Shimei hurled insults at David and his entourage, throwing stones at them as they journeyed to Bahurim. At this juncture, Abishai, one of David's cohorts and the guard of the king, requests that he be allowed to behead Shimei for his insults and impertinence toward the king (Longman & Garland, 2010). David responded with both humility and disciplined control when he said, "Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite [Shimei]! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to" (2 Samuel 16:11). David had every right to allow Abishai to kill Shimei and to assert his authority as the anointed king of Israel; however, he showed restraint and spared his life in submission to God's will and ultimate jurisdiction over David's circumstances (Hoffner, 2015). David demonstrated his discipline by leaving the disciplining of Shimei to God and not adding to the offenses his ego had committed in earlier chapters of his life. Thus, David demonstrated meekness in later years amid highly challenging circumstances, even when he had the social and moral authority to do otherwise.

Strategic Discipline and Vision

Successful entrepreneurial endeavors require a clear vision of success to galvanize stakeholder interest and attract and retain talent (Baum et al., 1998; Preller et al., 2020). Moses and David were not necessarily entrepreneurial leaders because they did not start businesses; however, they were both called to lead Israel into unknown territory and inspire their followers' thinking with transformative ideals. Their visions came from God, the highest authority, and the most precise direction anyone could hope for. In turn, they applied disciplined control in executing those visions, and although both failed at various points in their leadership journeys, they achieved the end state God had called them to (Ben-Hur & Jonsen, 2012; Jones, 2018; Soloveichik, 2017).

Entrepreneurs must establish a vision for their new venture, even if that venture is internal to or incubated by a larger organization. Innovative and progressive business concepts require a vision, or they may become disjointed and fail due to indiscriminate qualifications (Behling & Lenzi, 2019). Strategic vision provides an image of a future state that the business aspires to, allowing employees and stakeholders to envision their outcomes within the broader mission and vision framework. Therefore, the vision established by an entrepreneurial leader is a critical element in the organizational discipline and control framework, in the same way that constellations provide mariners with a focal point to steer and maintain their headings (Märk & Situm, 2024). For the Hebrews following Moses, the vision was multifaceted, beginning with freedom and ending with entrance into a promised land (Ben-Hur & Jonsen, 2012; Kaiser, 2017). For David, the vision was a unified Israel that prioritized God's will and actualized its status as a chosen people to be a light in a dark world (Benton, 2016; Soloveichik, 2017).

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The leader's vision is the foundation for organizational goals against which meekness can be applied through controlled discipline that pursues organizational success and outcomes, providing the necessary architecture for teams to be efficient and effective (Singh & Singh, 2021).

Meekness as a Motivator

Entrepreneurs, like all leaders, will face resistance to their endeavors and need to employ motivational strategies to ensure their vision is executed and achieved. Those who lack self-discipline may become discouraged when resistance arises and gives in to the temptation to disengage from their followers and the venture (Murnieks et al., 2020). Conversely, resistance may also result in a recalcitrant and defiant entrepreneur-leader who becomes overbearing, micromanaging the foundational activities of their followers (Hoang et al., 2022). Both ends of this behavior spectrum will undermine the business's vision and erode followers' motivations, leading to tangible losses and attrition (Märk & Situm, 2024). Winston and Tucker (2011) described meekness as a virtue that prevents these two extremes, and, when embodied, operates as a moderator between laissez-faire and overbearing leadership styles (p. 19).

David's abdication of leadership on the battlefield led to the materialization of real threats to Israel, himself, and others close to him. Moses abdicated by fleeing his failure to protect individual Hebrews under his authority, resulting in his exile and loss of influence. Both leaders also succumbed to overbearing attitudes, with David responding to his sin by micromanaging the assignment of a trusted officer, which ultimately led to the discovery of his failures and to Uriah's death (Hoffner, 2015). Moses took matters into his own hands when striking the rock with his staff against the command of God and, thus, lost his opportunity to enter the promised land after 40 years of wandering (Carpenter, 2012). In both contexts, these leaders lost social capital with their followers by failing to demonstrate disciplined control and to motivate them toward the ultimate vision. Entrepreneurial leaders should cultivate meekness as a constant virtue that permeates their behavior, fostering consistency, fairness, earnestness, and dedication to their followers. This will motivate followers toward a common goal, even when challenges inevitably arise, which is a common occurrence in new ventures.

Conclusion

Meekness is a virtue that entrepreneurial leaders can embody and apply to drive strategic vision and motivate employees around common goals. The capacity of an entrepreneur to cast a vision, share it, and motivate employees toward its achievement relies heavily on the leader's ability to pursue it with controlled discipline in the face of adversity, unforeseen change, cultural discontinuity, and team development cycles

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(Winston & Tucker, 2011). The Bible offers multiple examples of leaders who exemplified and violated the characteristics of meekness, demonstrating the effects of each (Longman & Garland, 2010). Still, God maintained the overall vision and used the failures of those leaders to bring about circumstances that glorified him and sanctified them. Entrepreneurial leaders embark on a process of change, growth, challenge, failure, and success that requires diligence, humility, and controlled discipline. The lack of literature on meekness as a leadership trait, particularly in entrepreneurial ventures, demonstrates the need for operational theories and testable hypotheses to determine the impact of meekness on employee motivation, talent acquisition, corporate identity, business outcomes, and appropriate leadership styles (Bocarnea, 2018; Kujanpää, 2022). This conceptual study is a clarion call for researchers to study meekness as a virtue in the context of business and develop empirical data that can assist in leadership development, strategy, and execution, particularly in new ventures where team development and leader competency develop simultaneously in a dynamic and often opaque environment (Sanz-Bas, 2023). As seen in the literature review and analysis, there is foundational research in leader humility, leadership virtues, and biblical profiles of leadership that can be built on to frame the argument for meekness as an integral beatific leadership virtue. Future research should build on these precepts to apply empirical methods that test the extent to which meekness influences employee motivation, startup member cohesion, and vision execution.

About the Author

Wesley Stewart is a third-year PhD student with Regent University in the Organizational Leadership program. He has been in federal service as a civilian for 15 years, serving as a special agent in the Department of Defense at multiple operational and leadership echelons. He is currently a senior program manager for the United States Marine Corps, leading an enterprise of military, civilian, and contract personnel. He served as a senior policy advisor and liaison in the Office of the Secretary of War and has extensive experience in authoring and implementing strategic national security policies. Prior to his federal service, he worked as a business management consultant for public- and private-sector clients across the United States. He has extensive experience in organizational development, strategic planning, and business and industrial performance analytics, and his research and analysis have been published in the Federal Register and in intelligence and national security publications. His research interests include biblical principles of leadership, entrepreneurial resilience, parasocial interactions, and adverse leadership impact scales.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: weslste@mail.regent.edu**.**

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Development and Execution of a Transformational Leadership Symposia Program in a Major Pharmaceutical Company – A Case Study

Wayne C. Shaw
Cairn University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

As mid-level leaders in a research department of a large pharmaceutical company, we recognized the need for broad cross-organizational leadership development. To address this need, we developed and executed a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices. We established eight foundational principles for the program—all based on biblical values and transformational leadership practices—and weaved these principles into each symposium of the program. We conducted 20 symposia on varied leadership topics over 2 years. We concluded that: (1) the model was well accepted in the large secular organization, with participant feedback demonstrating considerable learning and application of the biblically based foundational principles in the workplace; (2) there is no reason that these foundational principles and transformational leadership practices could not be effectively communicated in a similar manner within any large secular organization; and (3) this case study provides a model that could be used in other organizations.

Keywords: transformational leadership, leadership development, case study, biblical foundation, pharmaceutical industry

Prior to the intervention in the organization described below, it was widely recognized among mid-level leaders that employees were under considerable stress, which seemed to be associated with situational demands being placed on them by managers and overall company decisions, namely

- restructuring to initiate research on new disease entities and treatment paradigms,
- cultural incompatibility due to merging workforces from different global locations,

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- recent reductions in force from company decisions to strategically close and relocate workplaces,
- employee and manager stress due to the pandemic and expansion of hybrid work, and
- overall complexity of work in a highly regulated industry and VUCA environment.

Recognizing the need for broad cross-organizational leadership development in the department, we hypothesized that hosting structured discussions focused on leadership and employee development would be useful to promote dialogue, build better leaders, and enhance human flourishing. We established and executed a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices.

The Organization

At the time of the intervention, the organization was a 125-member medical research department in a major pharmaceutical company. Members of the department ranged from basic scientists to vice presidents and included MDs and PhDs (many with Ivy League and other prestigious credentials), with academic, clinical, and/or industry experience ranging from <1 year to more than 30 years. Within a few years following the intervention, the department was partially reorganized due to corporate-level decisions involving some reduction in force, and some specialty groups were divided among other departments.

The Principles of Transformational Leadership

The principles of transformational leadership were introduced by James McGregor Burns (1978) and further defined by Bernard Bass (1985). The principles have been recognized as:

idealized attributes: the leader's character, especially credibility and trust.

idealized behaviors: acting with integrity, living out the attributes of trust, morality, and justice.

inspirational motivation: inspiring others, showing that there is more than simply reward or punishment.

intellectual stimulation: encouraging others to think innovatively, developing their wisdom as critical and discerning thinkers.

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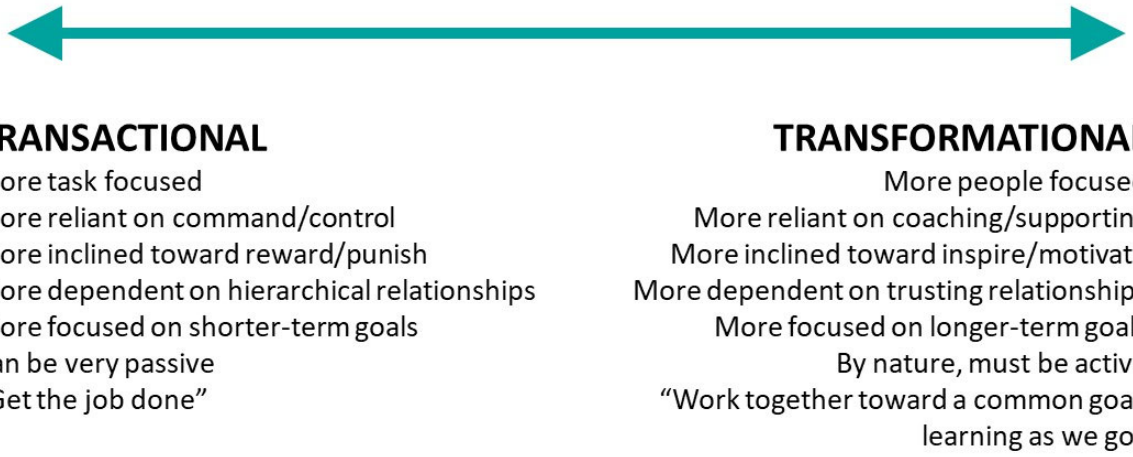
individualized consideration: coaching and supporting people with a focus on their growth and development, in a way that is most fitting for that individual follower, putting others before self in some ways. (Bass & Avolio, 1994)

Over the years, many authors have reinforced the importance of these elements in leadership, emphasizing the contrast between transformational and transactional leadership (Zaleznik, 1983, 1990). In any given leader/follower situation or relationship, we operate somewhere on the continuum between transactional and transformational approaches, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Transactional/Transformational Leadership Continuum and Key Characteristics of Each



As Burns pointed out, both transactional and transformational leadership have their place in contributing to human purpose. Both require a commitment to honesty, fairness, responsibility, and honoring commitments. However, even with such commitments in place, when a leader relies heavily on transactional principles, it becomes clear that they are not acting with the interest of their followers in mind. He likens what people often think of as leadership to a group of boys walking in front of a parade, no more leading it than tagging along for the walk. Burns notes that "transforming leaders 'raise' their followers up through levels of morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 426), emphasizing the value that transformational leaders have for their followers. When leaders value people, they work to help them develop and to care for them in the context of the workplace.

Winston (2008) related caring for followers to the biblical principle of *agapao* love, which is, in terms of a leader's behavior, the working out of concern and care the leader has for his or her followers. Agapao is the expression of *agape* love, a form of love that implies the leader is sacrificing some of his own interests to further the interest of his followers.

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Christian leaders must understand this as a command from Jesus (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2003, John 13:34–35) and should be willing and eager to bring this into their workplaces. This kind of love reflects a deep transformation of the leader's heart in caring for others.

It was with a sense of caring about the people in the department that I and a small group of mid-level leaders with faith in Judeo-Christian values and demonstrated experience with transformational leadership principles came together to establish and execute a program of lunchtime symposia focused on nudging leaders at all levels of the department toward more transformational practices. The department conducts medical research as part of a large pharmaceutical company.

In terms of information in the literature about incorporating principles of transformational leadership into large organizations, such as major corporations, Bass (1985) noted examples of leaders, such as Henry Ford, who achieved transformational effects on their subordinates and organizations, but who also exhibited very transactional behaviors. Bennis (1983), discussing complex organizations, pointed out the need for transformational leadership, particularly in generating, articulating, and communicating vision in a compelling way that encourages commitment from followers. Zaleznik (1983), distinguishing between managers and leaders in large organizations, pointed out the importance of reassessing individuals' needs and developing leaders at different levels. He also described the value of mentoring in this regard. He noted that "only when the values of an organization also can be expressed as the personal values of those within the organization can they have any real meaning" (Zaleznik, 1983, p. 39). But in general, there is little concrete information in the literature about instilling transformational leadership principles in large organizations. Further, there is essentially no information about incorporating biblical values into leadership development programs in large secular organizations. Thus, we present this as a case study, which could be used as a model for other large organizations.

Methodology

Program Development

The program was constructed to cover a wide variety of leadership development topics in 20 symposia presented over a 2-year period. The program was originally proposed to include 10 symposia presented over 1 year, but after initial assessments demonstrated employee appreciation and learning, it was expanded to a second year with 10 additional topics covered.

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For conceptual design, I worked with a team of four other mid-level leaders, each of whom espoused faith in Judeo-Christian principles and had documented success as leaders, as well as a genuine concern for the welfare of the people in the department.

The stated objective for the symposia program was to bring a discussion of contemporary leadership concepts and principles into the department, with the expectation of increasing understanding of what true leadership entails, building personal conviction for growing as leaders and team members, and modeling good leadership across the department.

Foundational Principles

Being faith-based leaders with an understanding of the elements of transformational leadership and recognizing a need to develop better leaders in our large secular organization, we defined eight statements (Shaw, 2019) that served as the foundational principles for the 20 symposia. The following foundational principles are consistent with biblical values and transformational leadership practices. True leadership:

- understands that people are critically important.
- is more than just getting the job done.
- requires self-awareness and essential elements of character, especially credibility.
- understands and promotes key values and knows how they determine the way people think and behave.
- understands and appreciates the importance of organizational culture.
- encourages people to use their intelligence to think innovatively, and provides individual coaching, mentoring, and support for their growth.
- involves transforming people into better leaders themselves, serving others before self, and understands the criticality of trust in building transformational relationships.
- requires humility more than power.

These foundational principles were communicated at the beginning and end of each symposium, and elements of the principles were incorporated into most of the symposia. They were core to the program. The emphasis on these foundational principles reflects the key underlying objective of the program—to nudge leaders at all levels toward more transformational practices.

Program Execution

Content for each symposium was gathered from landmark works by Bass (1985, 1990, 2000), Bennis (2003), Burns (1978), Taylor (2007), Edmondson (2019), Schein and Schein (2018), Kouzes and Posner (2023), Winston and Patterson (2006), and others,

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supplemented with contemporary work from *Harvard Business Review* and other leadership resources. Each symposium was 45–60 minutes and included a mix of lecture, questions, and discussion. The symposia incorporated case studies and practical exercises, and we provided contemporary journal articles for pre-reading and discussion. Sessions were held monthly, except for August and December. I prepared and presented each symposium. The presentation schedule and titles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Schedule and Titles of Symposia Presentations

Month	Year 1	Year 2
Jan	Fundamentals of Leadership	Followership
Feb	Organizational Culture and Change	Communication Basics and Complexities
Mar	Power and Influence in Leadership	Diversity and Inclusion
Apr	Complex Leadership Situations (VUCA, remote leadership, matrices, "wicked" problems)	Philosophies and Archetypes of Leadership
May	Conflict, Coercion, Powerlessness, and Toxicity	Navigating Organizational Politics
Jun	Humble (and Serving) Leadership	Motivation
Jul	Team Dynamics	Emotional Intelligence and Self-Awareness
Sep	Essentials of Feedback	Problem Solving and Decision-Making
Oct	Leadership Development	Adaptive Leadership
Nov	Board and Committee Leadership	Leadership Creativity and Innovation

Being a large commercial organization, formal approval was required. I and a small team of mid-level leaders shared the concept, objectives, foundational principles, and the proposed symposia schedule with top department management and human resources (HR). Approval was granted promptly, but prior individual personal discussions helped to pave the way. Detailed contents of the first few symposia were shared in advance with HR at their request.

Time slots were scheduled for the year in advance—all members of the department were invited, whether in leadership or not. The lunch period (Eastern time) was used so

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U.S. and European colleagues could join; very few department members were located in the Far East, but some of them also attended. When scheduling the sessions, conflicts with major internal management meetings and external scientific conferences were avoided to maximize opportunities for attendance. The months of August and December were skipped due to vacations and year-end business activities.

As the presenter, I sent reminders to department members a week prior to each symposium noting the topic and providing a link to prior reading materials (usually *Harvard Business Review* articles or case studies that I developed). Early in 2020, sessions began as hybrid in-person and online meetings, but with the pandemic, all remaining sessions went online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. All sessions were live. They were not recorded, but after each session, the presentation slides were posted into a shared electronic folder for access by all members of the department. Representatives from HR and interested employees in other departments were also granted access to the shared folder.

Evaluation

Formal and informal qualitative assessments were used to generate feedback. A formal survey was distributed in October of Year 1 to assess learning and an interest in continuing the symposia. Informal feedback was solicited after each symposium, particularly requesting suggestions for improvement and topics of interest.

Feedback

Feedback from the formal survey distributed in October of Year 1 showed overwhelming support for continuing to a second year. Responses to open-ended questions were generally favorable and, importantly, people provided specific examples that reflected application of the foundational principles. This was very encouraging.

Participants provided informal feedback after each symposium, which included suggestions for future symposia topics, and some of these suggestions were incorporated. Overall, comments were favorable and indicated learning and application.

People expressed concerns about the time limitations—they would have preferred more time in each session, and some asked about continuing into a third year. To help mitigate these concerns, I encouraged post-session dialogue with me and among other attendees. There was considerable follow-up dialogue, which evolved into coaching relationships between me and three mid-level department leaders. Two involved self-awareness and personal development coaching, and the third involved how to manage

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a difficult employee. There was also evidence of ongoing dialogue and application within the department, but this was not quantified.

Observations

Attendance was tracked and averaged about 60% of the department in each session, less during the summer months. About 82% of department members attended at least two symposia. Given how busy people were, this was an encouraging level of participation. Top-level department management did not attend any of the symposia, which was disappointing, but not unexpected. HR representatives only attended a few of the sessions. The head of HR was given access to the presentations in the shared folder, and although she accessed them, she did not respond to my offer to conduct the symposia more widely in the company.

There was robust participation from mid-level leaders including several in director, senior director, and vice president roles, as well as people who were not in leadership. Discussions within the symposia were interesting but limited due to the time constraints and the large number of participants. As noted previously, I participated in several private spin-off discussions, including three that evolved into coaching relationships focused on specific leadership issues.

There was a very interesting and somewhat surprising observation—never once were the eight foundational principles challenged by attendees, including "true leadership requires humility more than power." They are not principles that are commonly discussed in the realm of commercial business. They are not statements that are reflective of contemporary corporate jargon. Yet, people understand them. They are basic principles of life and relationships. They are personally encouraging for people working in the corporate environment. At heart, it seems we want our leaders to demonstrate transformational principles. This should encourage us as Christian leaders who desire to see our followers flourish.

Shortcomings and Learning

Attendees expressed concern about limitations on discussion due to time constraints and large numbers of participants in the sessions. I mitigated this to an extent by encouraging offline follow-up.

Additionally, we were not able to conduct long-term follow-up to assess incorporation of the foundational principles into regular leadership practice. This would have been useful information but became impractical due to subsequent department reorganizations and reassignments.

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If I were to advise someone who wished to implement a similar program in their organization, I would recommend that they use the foundational principles noted above as a basis and tailor the content for the needs of their specific organization. I would also suggest that they build in methods for long-term follow-up of the program's effectiveness.

Conclusion

It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of this intervention on the organization have been. However, based on qualitative feedback, the short-term results were remarkable. There was considerable discussion during and following the sessions, and several cases in which leaders who had attended the sessions documented application of the foundational principles in their relationships and interactions with their followers. Further, as a result of the symposia, I developed coaching relationships with three attendees.

In conclusion, the model was well accepted in this large secular organization, and participant feedback indicated that there was considerable learning and application of the foundational principles, which are consistent with biblical values and transformational leadership practices. It can also be concluded that there is no reason that these biblically based foundational principles and transformational leadership practices could not be effectively communicated in a similar manner within any large secular organization. Finally, this case study provides a model that could be used in other organizations, including large secular corporations.

About the Author

Dr. Shaw led global clinical research teams in the pharmaceutical industry for 52 years before retiring in 2024. During his career, he authored numerous scientific articles in peer-review journals. He serves as an adjunct professor at Cairn University near Philadelphia, teaching courses in leadership and research, and advising students on capstone projects. He is also an independent leadership consultant and coach, as well as an ordained ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Wayne C. Shaw, 15 Cabana Dr, Silverlake, WA 98645. Email: waynecshaw@gmail.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Experience, Intelligence, and the Adult Third Culture Kid Advantage: A Qualitative Research Study

Elizabeth S. Wolfe
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

A deficit of empirical evidence exists on why and how adult third culture kids (ATCKs), those who have spent a portion or all of their childhood in a country outside their passport (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), who hold the potential to advantage in this arena, could thrive as set apart from peers raised in a mono-cultural setting. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study aimed to extend the research by utilizing the experiential learning theory (ELT) and the constructs of cultural intelligence (CQ), obtaining rich data from purposeful participants' lived experiences to answer the research question: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios? Data collection took place through virtual interviews with four ATCK participants gathered through convenience sampling. Three interview questions were asked. The analysis resulted in 25 concept codes, which were distilled into eight themes anchored to the ELT and CQ constructs. The results evidenced three advantageous skills: observation, empathy, and intuition. For ATCKs, these skills are embedded in core processes, advancing them to lead in culturally dynamic organizations. The lived experiences of the participants affirmed the theoretical validity of the ELT and CQ as aspects of professional acumen. Further research could extend the theoretical literature by investigating aspects of spiritual learning and practitioner literature by developing recruiting frameworks for organizations to employ ATCKs toward an inclusive culture and diversity management.

Keywords: experiential learning theory, cultural intelligence, ATCKs, leadership

There is a deficit of empirical evidence available about why and how adult third culture kids (ATCKs), those who have spent a portion or all of their childhood in a country other than their passport (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), who hold the potential to advantage in this arena, could thrive as set apart from peers raised in a mono-cultural

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setting. In a rapidly globalizing world where the success of multinational companies relies heavily on equipping their leadership with global competencies (Ng et al., 2009), there is an opportunity for individuals with a high cultural aptitude to thrive, perhaps even be industry leaders. Wonderment arises: Who can fill these globally minded leadership roles? Is there a demographic of people being raised to develop competencies of cultural acumen, poising them to take places of leadership in multinational organizations as adults? Furthermore, if this demographic exists, are they being equipped and engaged to actualize into leadership roles in a globalized organizational construct?

Organizations have engaged in programs for employees to earn the multicultural skillsets needed to lead in a globalized climate, ranging from in-house diversity training to cross-cultural assignments (Ng et al., 2009). Practical programming finds a basis in experiential learning theory (ELT) developed by Kolb (1984), with evidence of the value added for the leaders who participate (Ng Et al., 2009; Erez et al., 2013). ELT examines experience's crucial role in effective adult learning and development (Ng et al., 2009). Cultural intelligence (CQ), defined as a person's ability to be effective in cross-culturally diverse settings (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016), thematically pervades discussion around leadership aptitude and efficacy. As utilized in multinational organizational leadership scenarios, ELT is employed to determine if the programs result in higher levels of CQ by those who participate. The results of these programs are the subject of current research; however, a gap exists in using ELT to compare the acquisition of CQ post-childhood from those raised solely in their passport country and those who develop it over time through adolescence, immersed in a foreign context.

To perform this qualitative research, purposeful participants, who understand and have experienced the issue at hand (Winston, 2021), were chosen to supply data via open-ended interview questions. The criterion for the participants includes ATCKs who have spent a minimum of 1 year of childhood living in a country other than their passport country, ATCKs who are presently serving in a globalized organizational leadership setting, ATCKs who have served in a globalized organizational leadership setting for a minimum of 5 years, and ATCKs who serve on leadership teams or in a group leadership setting (not solo). With ELT and the concepts of CQ as a framework, these purposeful participants were inquisitively engaged to glean data toward the discovery of information to aid in answering the research question.

Theoretical learning outcomes have been proposed in research that collaborates ELT and CQ (Erez et al., 2013; Ng et al., 2009); however, applications of these outcomes have yet to be specifically reviewed in practical settings with participants who lived all or a portion of their developmental years in a foreign context. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to extend the research by utilizing ELT and working with the conceptual constructs of CQ, obtaining rich data from purposeful

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participants' lived experiences to answer the research question: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios?

Theories and Concepts

Experiential Learning Theory

ELT was first developed by David Kolb (1984), building on the foundation of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget to create an experiential theory different from existing cognitive and behavioral learning theories. Learning in ELT is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001). Within the ELT, there are two methods of obtaining experience: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Kolb et al., 2001). In ELT, there are two methods of transforming experience: reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb et al., 2001).

These elements are logically connected and make up the four-stage learning cycle of ELT: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, which allows learning from experience (Ng et al., 2009). Concrete experiences are immediate and tangible (Ng et al., 2009). Interactions between people and what is felt and understood from daily experiences (Kolb, 1984) launch the learning process. These events are then considered and interpreted into a symbolic understanding of what happened (Ng et al., 2009), which is abstract conceptualization in the ELT. After the individual experiences and understands, learning continues with action. Next, the person processes internally through reflective observation (Ng et al., 2009), and active thinking begins to transform the experience toward functioning. Finally, active experimentation involves doing and taking what has been internally processed and understood into the external world through action (Ng et al., 2009). The cyclical learning flow begins with concrete experiences providing the foundation for reflection and concept-building, which are then actively tested (Kolb et al., 2001). Individuals first grasp an experience and then transform the data into intelligence (Ng et al., 2009). The holistic theoretical concept of experiential learning provides a foundation for this research to embark on a discovery process, determining if ATCKs' childhood experiences produce knowledge that gives them a professional edge over mono-cultural peers. Keeping the research question central to this project, the concepts of ELT served to formulate the following interview question:

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- IQ1 - How do you feel your developmental experiences from your childhood and adolescence contributed to your globalized identity and cross-cultural leadership skillsets?

Cultural Intelligence

Research affirms that CQ, the ability to function and manage culturally diverse scenarios effectively, can be learned (Ng et al., 2009); however, the learning platform influences the longevity of the lifespan of the skillsets. Pollack and Van Reken (2009) affirmed that skills acquired in developmental years internalize and become part of the individual's core processes. ACTK's opportunity to acquire CQ from childhood potentially boosts their value to multinational work teams and organizations. CQ is comprised of four ways of abstracting individual intelligence: metacognitive intelligence, cognitive intelligence, motivational intelligence, and behavioral intelligence (Ng et al., 2009).

Metacognitive intelligence is the ability to be consciously aware amid intercultural experiences, emphasizing the mental capacity to obtain and understand in culturally diverse settings while maintaining self-control and a sober mind (Ng et al., 2009). Ng et al. (2009) expanded this into planning, monitoring, and revising before, during, and after experiences have taken place. Operating with metacognitive CQ requires high-level thinking and agility on all sides of multicultural encounters. People with cognitive CQ can anticipate, understand, compare, and contrast elements of cross-cultural scenarios (Ng et al., 2009). The emphasis is on knowledge of diverse social, legal, and economic systems, resulting in accurate expectations and lowered reactionary responses (Ng et al., 2009).

The ability to cope with unfamiliar dynamic situations by focusing on what can be learned from the apparent cultural differences is motivational CQ (Ng et al., 2009). There are two types of motivation: intrinsic, including self-efficacy, and extrinsic (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016; Ng et al., 2009). Intrinsically motivated individuals seek challenges and push themselves into exploration to expand capacities through learning (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016), which produces self-confidence about interacting in diverse, dynamic situations (Ng et al., 2009). In contrast, external motivation aims to meet a goal outside the work (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016), depending on someone or something else to foster determination toward achievement. Behavioral CQ is the ability to operate appropriately for a broad spectrum of stations and exhibits culturally appropriate "words, tones, gestures, and facial expressions" (Ng et al., 2009, p. 515). A person who acts according to rules acceptable in a unique cultural setting and adjusts to dynamic environments operates at a high level of behavioral intelligence (Erez et al., 2013). Behavioral CQ includes dexterity in verbal and nonverbal communication, drilling down to gestures and facial expressions that are nuanced from

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culture to culture (Erez et al., 2013). The literature agreed that all four CQ elements directly correlate to success in multicultural organizational settings. Ng et al. (2009) postulated that the elements of CQ enhance the effectiveness of ELT, and discovering international experiences provided concrete experiential opportunities to receive feedback toward learning. Literature and current research on CQ and its implications for ATCKs, coupled with the research question, cultivated the following interview question:

- IQ2 - How have concrete experiences and learning in formative years impacted your values, motivation, and perceived levels of cultural intelligence?

Adult Third Culture Kids

Living abroad a portion or all of their developmental years increases awareness of cultural diversity for third culture kids (TCKs), who develop valuable tools for interaction in the areas of cross-cultural, observational, social, and linguistic skillsets for survival in their formative years and application in adulthood (Pollack & Van Reken, 2009). These personal skills heighten sensitivity to intimate cultural cues in cross-cultural settings and carry the potential to be bridge builders in professional careers (Pollack & Van Reken, 2009). Individual learned and lived experiences cause ATCKs to bring unique and personalized perspectives to a scenario (Pollack & Reken, 2009). For ATCKs who lived cross-culturally with parents who served in humanitarian, non-profit, or ministry vocations, there is a motivation and moral value placed on learning about host cultures to work and thrive. Qualitative interviews conducted by Stokke (2013) populated unplanned testimonies of the significant influence of positive parental attitude and approach on the ACTKs' worldview. Conventional training for adult expatriate, international businesspersons cannot impose motivation or values; however, these are key to success rates (Stokke, 2013). Research notes that learning experiences gained in developmental years constructively influence the adjustment abilities of adult expatriates (Selmer & Lauring, 2014). Due to globalization, ATCKs' expatriate experiences and heightened cultural awareness highlight them as potential sources for international business careers (Nash, 2020).

ATCKs have concrete experiences in culturally diverse settings during formative years, cultivating an opportunity to enact the ELT, centralizing the role of experience in the learning process (Kolb et al., 2001) toward obtaining high levels of CQ. The research is clear about the potential available from ACTKs' experiential learning in the seminal years, skills development, and cultural intelligence. The question is: Why is this different from their mono-cultural peers? How does that translate to the successful corporate leadership of multinational organizations or international business scenarios?

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Sourcing from the literature to glean a greater understanding to answer the research question, the following interview question was formed:

- IQ3 - How does your upbringing as a TCK influence your ability to discern what is happening in dynamic cultural scenarios, acting appropriately to resolve conflict with diverse team members in the workplace?

There is a connection between ELT and cultural intelligence (CQ) that converges with ATCKs. The ELT states that learning experiences are intentionally cultivated, engaging participants to actively develop intellectually and emotionally (Erez et al., 2013), and when applied to cultural aptitude, undergirds the acquisition of CQ. CQ carries capacities for learning that enhance the translation of expatriate vocational experiences into desired learning outcomes through ELT functions of "experiencing, reflecting, observing, and experimenting" (Ng et al., 2009, p. 514). The multicultural experiences of ACTKs could link to the development of CQ, equipping them to handle adjustment and integration in host cultures with keen awareness, a skill unnatural in mono-cultural adults (Selmer & Lauring, 2014). The dynamic environment of multinational organizations staffed by individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and therefore expectations (Erez et al., 2013), necessitates leaders to operate with a high level of CQ. ATCKs may have an advantage to succeed, even lead, in multi-cultural and diverse industries when learned experiences are transformed into high levels of cultural intelligence, giving them a potential advantage over mono-cultural peers. As explained in the following methods section, qualitative data was collected through interviews with purposeful participants to cultivate empirical evidence to answer the research question.

Methods and Procedures

Interview Questions

Working from the literature, based on ELT and the concept of CQ tied to ATCKs, interview questions were asked of purposeful participants aimed to glean deep-level data toward answering the research question of why upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport adds an advantage over peers raised in a mono-cultural setting to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios? ELT conceptually holds that knowledge is ascertained through experiences that transform an individual (Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001). Concrete experiences and abstract conceptualization play equal roles in ELT's concept of knowledge acquisition (Kolb et al., 2001). ATCKs have tangible experiences in their childhood that are different from what they would have faced if they were raised in their passport country. The practical fact of the diversity among countries and cultures causes people to function differently. The ability to operate in and manage culturally diverse scenarios is the premise for CQ

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(Ng et al., 2009). Children internalize the skills learned in their developmental years, and these become assets as a part of their core processes (Pollack & Van Reken, 2009). The interview questions were asked to inquire how these skills provide an advantage in the participants' adult vocation. The interview questions were asked as follows:

- IQ1 - How do you feel your developmental experiences from your childhood and adolescence contributed to your globalized identity and cross-cultural leadership skillsets?
- IQ 2 - How have concrete experiences and learning in formative years impacted your values, motivation, and perceived levels of cultural intelligence?
- IQ 3 - How does your upbringing as a TCK influence your ability to discern what is happening in dynamic cultural scenarios, acting appropriately to resolve conflict with diverse team members in the workplace?

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Design.

To answer the research question, I conducted qualitative research using phenomenological research methodology. Within qualitative research, phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of a lived experience from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Citing Moran (2000), the definition of phenomenology given by Gill (2014) is the study of something that happened to someone in their lived experience. Miles et al. (2020) emphasized choosing phenomenological research when examining the experience and its implications for a study. Phenomenology employs Giorgi's (2012) method of descriptive phenomenology, which is both descriptive and interpretive.

According to Gill (2014), the Giorgi method sought to describe the essence of a phenomenon by focusing on meaning units and is best utilized to understand an occurrence that is generally shared by multiple individuals. The research question focused on ATCKs' individual experiences in their developmental years outside their passport country and sought to understand how this impacts their performance in diverse leadership settings. Through the data collection, the descriptions of the participants' actual experiences served as an informative control. The interpretation provided insight into what Giorgi (2012) called "non-given" factors of this methodology to answer the research question (p. 4). Interviews were conducted with purposeful participants. The actual experiences lived were heard and recorded precisely as articulated and then, following Giorgi (2012), were reflected upon to translate the acts toward meaningful conclusions.

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Purposeful Participants

Purposeful participants were chosen, as they understood and had experience within the scope of the research question (Winston, 2021). The minimum sample size was at least three individuals to acquire enough breadth of experiential data to achieve saturation of the issue (Gill, 2014). Additionally, the participant threshold was five, as a small sample group was necessary to thoroughly investigate all descriptions and data given (Gill, 2014). The criterion of the participants chosen were ATCKs who (a) had spent a minimum of one year of childhood living in a country other than their passport country, (b) were presently serving in a globalized organizational leadership setting, (c) had worked in a globalized organizational leadership setting for a minimum of 5 years, and (d) were presently on leadership teams or in a group leadership setting (not solo).

Due to accessibility and time constraints, I employed convenience sampling, choosing participants I knew. To ward against sampling bias, I used the stated criteria to structure the inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). Furthermore, to reduce any opportunity for bias resulting from my relational proximity to the participants, financial compensation was not issued for involvement in the project (Miles et al., 2020); however, I expressed my gratitude was expressed in written and verbal form. Direct communications were emailed to five potential participants, describing the project's scope, participation requirements, and time and technology requirements. The email invited the individual to participate in the interview process with a stated response timeline. Participants were selected who best related to the research question and who had the availability to engage and the most relevant experience related to the phenomenon (Miles et al., 2020). Four participants were selected from the potential sampling of five to meet methodology boundaries (Gill, 2014).

Conducting the Interviews.

After the purposeful participants had agreed and been selected, the process of conducting the interviews was executed. Interviews were scheduled with each participant and conducted via Microsoft Teams, a digital conferencing platform. An invitation link with the date and time was emailed to each participant. Interviews were audio recorded using the Microsoft Teams Transcribe, and I typed notes in a Microsoft Word document while recording the participant's responses. Notes were documented in writing of nonverbal observations and tone of voice; however, for ethical purposes, the video recordings were permanently deleted. My goal was to record the depth of the participants' experiences within the project's scope, providing data to answer the research question (Gill, 2014).

The interview opened with questions to relax the participant before they begin sharing about their current leadership role and primary historical factors from their expatriate

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childhood experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To obtain data on the participants' lived experiences, three open-ended interview questions were asked to determine the essence of the participants' lifeworld related to the research question. As the interviewer, I acted as the exchange's chief listener, allowing participants to disclose their complete responses to each question. However, when the participant did not directly answer the question or I needed further details, I restated and probed to keep the interview directed toward obtaining data that would answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once the three interview questions had been posed and thoroughly answered, the interview was closed with gratitude and an affirmation of confidentiality, which concluded the audio recording (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Final notes of observations were written in the Word document.

Data Organization Procedure

The data organization process began with the interview files. The recordings from the audio interviews were transcribed using the Transcribe feature in Microsoft Teams. The transcript was generated in a Microsoft Word document and downloaded. My typed notes created during the interviews were used to support understanding and analysis of the data in the transcript. The transcripts were read for understanding. Intellectus Qualitative software was employed after I collected and reviewed the data. This tool was used to analyze and provide codes for the data based on eight themes tied to the literature I input with empirical sources. The output of Intellectus Qualitative was reviewed and audited to ensure concept codes and themes aligned with the study boundaries and the research question. Additionally, codes were added by the researcher using concept coding (Miles et al., 2020), which added to the output of Intellectus Qualitative.

Concept coding was employed to assign macro-levels of meaning to the data (Miles et al., 2020). Broader than a single action or observation, a concept is a short phrase that issues symbolic representation to a suggested meaning (Miles et al., 2020). Rather than a specific behavior, a concept suggests an idea or process by analytically harmonizing small to large sections of data into a word or phrase that connects holistically with the research question (Miles et al., 2020). The Intellectus Qualitative software issued concept codes following the input of the research problem and question, as well as theory scope. Concept codes produced by Intellectus Qualitative software are labeled with "AI" before the code name. I added additional concept codes to allow for the diversity of the interviewee's background and experiences to inform the result and ensure the research question was answered. Subsequently, I organized the data into sections by theme with corresponding concept codes, utilizing the output from Intellectus Qualitative, in a table with frequency listed.

According to Gill (2014), the Giorgi phenomenological research method requires bracketing. Bracketing is defined as the researcher placing boundaries (brackets) around

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themselves to limit the influence of personal bias on a study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The researcher restricts themselves by withholding assumptions and opinions to validate the participant's perspective while maintaining contact with present reality (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). There is no universally agreed-upon timing for bracketing in qualitative research; however, Giorgi (2012) advocated for bracketing to be held off until the data analysis section (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Saturation

Saturation is achieved when nothing new occurs, such as by interviewing or including new participants (Winston, 2021). Additionally, categoric and thematic saturation occurs when new data does not supply further ideas to answer the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Gill (2014), the Giorgi method requires at least three participants, calling for a small sample size. The scope of this research proposal was limited to one research question and three interview questions. To obtain adequate testimonies to answer the research question, saturation for this project occurred at four participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis section is ordered by themes with corresponding coded responses for all four participants. Excerpts from interview transcripts are included, supporting each concept code. A section on themes organized in alignment with the coding process distills the concept codes into grouped patterns (Miles et al., 2020). I edited the transcripts to eliminate grammar errors and content redundancy; however, raw participants' responses to explain lived experiences were maintained. The concept codes are clustered into themes. The themes are used to answer the research question.

To understand the testimony of the participants from the lifeworld described, I assumed a discovery posture toward the data (Giorgi, 2012). Giorgi's (1985) method, as cited in Gill (2014), offers four steps for data analysis: (a) a complete reading of the participant's testimony to sense the experience holistically, (b) reading to define and mark meaning units, (c) use of Husserl's imaginative variation to examine meaning units, and , (d) collaborating and synthesize meaning units into a concise structure of the phenomenon, which is the essence (Gill, 2014). The use of the Intellectus Qualitative software compiled concept codes organized within themes I provided based on theoretical constructs with empirical sources. A theme description precedes the related cluster of concept codes with frequencies provided in table format. The supporting testimonies from the purposeful participants provide a holistic presentation of the data analysis in pursuit of answering the research question.

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Theme Description for Concrete Experience

Concrete experience is experiencing. Concrete experiences are immediate and tangible events that happened in a person's formative years that shape learning, understanding, and behavior. (Ng et al., 2009). Interactions between people and what is felt and understood from daily experiences launch the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). The following codes emerged from analyzing and rereading the interview transcripts from all four participants. The codes contained within the theme are included in Table 1 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 1: Code Frequencies for Concrete Experience

Concept code	Frequency
AI: Family influence on cultural intelligence	4
AI: Language as cultural connection	4
AI: Crisis resilience leadership	4

Code Excerpts: AI: Family Influence on Cultural Intelligence

> "I told you all this because I think because my parents instilled that curiosity in me early on" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> "I was a translator for my family. My parents learned Portuguese, and so did I. But soon enough, both myself and my brother, we spoke Portuguese fluently and my parents didn't (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> I realized my mom often was so kind to go pick them up because we had to prepare the chicken early on and there was a lot. So, I saw my parents be kind. They were very kind to the workers. They were very poor people, but they were so kind to them and my mom always gave free stuff, she was so generous. There was something about my mom that I hold on to today. She was generous. On Sundays when we are about to close, she would just wrap whatever was left over up and give it to every worker. Every worker would get a bag of food, and till today I remember she was just always, always generous, always giving. When we would go to someone's home she would always tell me never go empty handed, always bring something. When she would see someone in need, unless it was something strange, like I always my memory of my mom was just always helpful, always giving and more than you expect not just a little bit. She would go always above and beyond to bless the people that were around her. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

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> I think my parents' openness to cultures and there they instilled curiosity in my heart, they instill faith. I was not afraid to go to new places just because my dad and my mom were both examples for me of going to a new place, of starting new things. And my dad went to Brazil with $1,000. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

Code Excerpts: AI: Language as Cultural Connection

> "And early on, I remember my parents just telling me that I needed to learn as many languages as possible" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> My parents, because there's Mandarin and there's Hakka. Hakka is a dialect, a Chinese dialect. My dad is Hakka. My mom is Taiwanese. There is a Taiwanese dialect and the Hakka dialect. But my dad really wanted our whole family to speak Hakka and not just Mandarin, because Mandarin is the standard language for all education. He did not want me just to learn Mandarin. He wanted us to learn Hakka because he felt that we needed to understand first our own culture and even regardless of where you are in the world, you're always, he always told me you're always going to look Asian and so you need to know and understand your culture. And so that was a beautiful thing. My dad had definitely foresight because I know how difficult it is to maintain a language when you are not in your home country. And he really made a point. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> "Experience early on, like I just enjoyed it. I just loved hearing about different cultures and then hearing different languages. And I often would hear Hakka Portuguese" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> My mom learned Hakka so that she could speak with my grandparents and so that's the beginning of my love for languages, because I spoke Hakka at home and then Portuguese at school, and then when I was in fifth grade, my dad and my mom put me in like English classes. So, then I started learning English and taking English as a foreign language at a kind of special school. I was already early on doing three languages. And because of that, I just naturally always enjoyed languages. Because it was fostered and my dad talked about how important it was to know languages. When I think about my growing up years, that is part of my love for culture, my love for languages and I'm able to see it; it blends together. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

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Code Excerpts: AI: Crisis Resilience Leadership

> I think that's very important that I grew up around people who remember crisis, political crisis, economic crisis. Some people even remembered wars and we even had war next door to us. So, I think how it impacted me. I do think that I have the growth mindset, right. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> So basically, my years growing up in Bulgaria, right. I'll use this example that I actually thought about many times. In the world of business, you have CEOs, right, like a CEO that is like you need the CEO for a growth, right. But also, you need, you need CEOs like let's say when things are good with the economy, things are growing, you need a CEO with a growth mindset, right? And I think then on the other, on the flip side, you have a CEO for like war times, right? When you have to cut budgets, the economy is not doing well, company is going for something really, really challenging. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> I have lower expectations. So, I'm more of a type of person that I have like higher appreciations, lower, lower expectations and that's I think again is because of how I grew up. I can also give you an example on the flip side, seeing people that grew up here in the USA in having good times and they don't remember bad times. So, they haven't even heard about bad times like that equation is flipped with having more expectations and less appreciations, right. It's all about expecting, expecting, expecting. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> I grew up with, even though I was fortunate enough where my family was doing OK, we were sort of like considered like upper middle class. Really, I saw the scarcity around me. I saw the struggle around me, right? And I think, basically, I keep giving this example, a personal example where, let's say, if I complain something to me to my parents who are still alive and then I'll tell my mother. Hey, I struggle with this problem at work and it really sucks and like, it's just kind of like really spinning, spilling out my guts, right? Like how frustrated I'm at work. Like she'll sometimes ask me the question of like, are you getting paid? I'm like, of course I'm getting paid, right? (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

Theme Description for Abstract Conceptualization

Abstract conceptualization is reflecting. Events and experiences are then considered and interpreted into a symbolic understanding of what happened (Ng et al., 2009). Operationally, the individual goes through experiences and then intentionally reflects

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in order to understand those experiences. The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 2 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 2: Code Frequencies for Abstract Conceptualization

Concept code	Frequency
AI: Identity complexity	4
AI: Cultural identity evolution	2
Global citizenship	3

Code Excerpts: AI Identity Complexity

> "The downside is I have a less developed personal identity. I don't have a as much of a unique flavor of person" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

> Like the high school type stereotypes kind of fall off as you get older, but I am probably less comfortable than most of my peers in a homogeneous situation that I don't think that I grew up with the same kind of formative experiences of standard party backyard BBQs or sports games that I feel like I am less at home in a situation where most Americans would probably think that it is just a normal everyday thing. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> Simple things like that I don't have the same and I think that this is getting less important just because we are more connected but a normal American growing up in a single town probably has more shared experiences. They watched the same TV show as their peers. They saw the same sports games. They rooted for the same team. They had a very linear or not maybe not linear, but a much more common high school experience or developmental experience that they developed their motivations and their understanding the world with their peers instead of with new peers. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> "I do feel like I have a hard time integrating into something that might be like a comfortable setting for someone who grew up in America" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

Code Excerpts: AI Cultural Identity Evolution

> Well, I think my upbringing, it has a lot to do with who I am, right? I would split my like my makeup of my personality and my tendencies and who I am into two pieces. So, one of them is obviously growing up in a different country, so basically growing up until teenage years. That really stays with me and it's not

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> going anywhere. I, this is kind of pretty cool, who I am, right? This is sort of like the fabric of my personality, my cultural intelligence, if you will. But then also I would say at 17 years old, then really running into a completely different culture and really experience. Seeing what cultural shock really means, basically it made me up who I am as an adult. I think at the core it's how I grew up, the first 17 years of my life. Basically, like all these kinds of tendencies with me, but then I can't really tell where I can put more weight whether it's like after 17 or before that. But for me the experience of like really coming to a country like USA at 17 years of age was truly transformational. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> Now going back to my original culture, we go there once every two years for four or five weeks. I can tell you that going back to my home country, I feel a foreigner because I also took so much of the American culture as well. It is a paradox. You're asking me about my identity and how much of that makes me as a leader. But I think in a way the paradox is that I think I lost my identity. Honestly, like I yes, I'm Bulgarian. I carry that culture. I know the language and the culture, but I also don't anymore, right? Because I think I've changed. A lot. And I've also like really adapted to different culture. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

Code Excerpts: Global Citizenship

> For my global identity I would say it was foundational in my, in my identity. I'm truly just telling you how I perceive my myself and my world, but I feel a citizen of the world. I do not feel like I am from one country more than another. I truly believe I can belong everywhere. I also belong nowhere. It's that, that weird tension you have as a third culture kid. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> And so I definitely feel like it shaped my identity and my global identity in, in the sense of I mean it when I say I love all human beings. I don't feel nationalistic at all, in fact I really, really abhor it. I don't share that everywhere, but I have a very hard time with nationalism. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> "Not that I don't take pride in being an American. Sure, I do. I mean, it's incredible that I got to be an American, but I don't have a nationalistic view" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025).

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Theme Description for Reflective Observation

Reflective observation is thinking. The person processes internally through reflective observation, and active thinking transforms the experience toward functioning (Ng et al., 2009). Participants verbalized what they have experienced and thought as they process events in their formative years and how that shapes their actions as an adult. The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 3 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 3: Code Frequencies for Reflective Observation

Concept code	Frequency
AI: Constant cultural processing	3
AI: Adaptability to change	2
AI: Multicultural identity formation	5
AI: Cultural conflict resolution	2
Stress inoculation	2

Code Excerpts: AI Constant Cultural Processing

> "Being a TCK where all you really are ever doing is processing, you're constantly processing. You're constantly as a child processing your surroundings and where do I fit" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)?

> Yeah, I think again, as a young TCK, you're just this computer who is absorbing a tremendous amount of information. And then once that's absorbed, you're trying to find filters for it. Like where, what categories am I going to put all this information in? And then how does, how do those categories connect to one another? And so it's like a networking in your brain constantly and trying to find pathways. This constant need to find pathways of connection that's always going on in the background. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> There's so much introspection that happens either consciously or unconsciously when you're at TCK, because you're comparing what you're seeing out there with yourself all the time. And how do I fit and where am I going to go with my actions? And how am I going to decide who I'm going to be? And how am I going to decide that based on what my parents are from? And who, where I'm from based on that as far and also where I'm living at the moment that's influencing me and how is this going to make, shape me and make me fit in, but also be uniquely me. And so I think that absolutely influences discernment

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> because you're doing that constantly. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

Code Excerpts: AI Adaptability to Change

> "Frequently being the new person. My birthday is August 25th, and that was the first day of school and I attended 13 different schools before I graduated high school" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

> I do seek to develop value for more than myself, but a group in terms of motivations. I think that I'm undeterred by most change that would deter a lot of other people, and I think that's helped me not be afraid of opportunities that I might miss. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

Code Excerpts: AI Multicultural Identity Formation

> I was born in Taiwan, and at 11 months old, my parents moved to Brazil. And I grew up in Brazil until I was about 13 years old. And from 13 on, we were in Memphis, Tennessee for a couple of months and then the rest of the time in Orange County, California. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> And so having grown up in a different, bicultural situation and then later coming to the United States like I got a third culture. I was able to learn different ways of thinking and different points of view. I've learned to adjust to different ideas and see the strengths in every culture. I saw what was actually most effective in every culture. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> "So, I really remember how hard it was, even in Brazil, because I did not fit as a Brazilian, I was Taiwanese, right? And then they always thought I was Japanese because I was Asian" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> And I think about it now that I'm older, I realize, wow, praise God that my parents were open and also mindful enough to expose me and not just to say, well, we're in Brazil, you're just going to learn Brazil and Brazilian culture and we're just going to do that. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> When I think about my growing up years, that is part of my love for culture, my love for languages, and I'm able to see it, it blends together. We were in Brazil and Brazil is full of Japanese and it's full of, especially in Sao Paulo where we lived and we have Chinese in Brazil. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

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Code Excerpts: AI Cultural Conflict Resolution

> Now when it comes to conflict resolution, I think that this is also a very cultural thing and I can make a huge difference between the contrast. So in in my culture, conflict is dealt with head on. You have, you have a problem with someone, someone has a problem with you, you'll be a face-to-face conflict resolution right away. Whereas in, in the USA, I think you have to ask a mediator right away, you have to go around and bring five more people and so there are pros and cons to both of them. But I think how it changed me as a leader is that I'm really good at the defense. Like if, for example, someone has a conflict with me, I'm really good at like basically dealing with conflict because I'm very comfortable with it. If someone has a conflict and just directly tells me I have a problem personally with you. I'm like, great, what is it, right? I have no problem with it. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> So, it's a balancing act. It's not a balance, it's more of a balancing act. So being hyper focused on the hyper aware of the environment and people and what drives them, I think then it just helps me decide what tool to use for conflict resolution. And I might go for a mediation. But also, I want to make sure I'm okay with doing the direct conflict resolution as well. I think if you avoid the conflict and really not talk about it and just like leaving it, leaving it untouched, like just, it's just, I think, crazy and creates a lot of problems. And they don't go away. But then just people, people go away, right? Like they'll say like, well this organization sucks, my boss is not a good person. That's why I left one year later. But I, but I'm like, did you even try to resolve the conflict? (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

Code Excerpts: Stress Inoculation

> I think that the stress inoculation pieces are hugely important. That a growth mindset happens because you're not afraid of failure, rejection, or hardship. And I think in the formative years of my life, I was faced frequent, frequently with those things. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> I can say any sort of human interaction can create stress, especially in a new situation, and I think that having the same repeated experience over and over inoculated me against a lot of that sort of stress. And so, the motivation, so the value I think that people are relatively the same everywhere in terms of not only basic needs but also basic desires and motivations. It just might manifest itself differently. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

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Theme Description for Active Experimentation.

Active experimentation is acting. Active experimentation involves doing and taking what has been internally processed and understood into the external world through action (Ng et al., 2009). Individuals enact behaviors based on what they have experienced, processed, and understood. The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 4 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 4: Code Frequencies for Active Experimentation

Concept code	Frequency
AI: Leadership through relationships	4
AI: Pride in work ethic	3
AI: Unorthodox problem-solving	3

Code Excerpts: AI Leadership Through Relationships

> "I shouldn't have to worry about it, right? Like somebody else could worry about it, right? But it's hard for me not to be like, I feel that part of my mentorship and my training and loving people" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> It doesn't look the same. I'm not giving out chicken, but it's different. I realized that I give in different ways and maybe most professors will not usually treat a student to coffee, but like, I almost have a hard time like not treating them well. I realized that I lead from relationship. It's very difficult for me to lead without relationship and I want to get to know people more, in a much deeper way than just surface level. I've had to kind of navigate that in, in an institution because it doesn't look the same. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> It's difficult to know how to resolve conflict if you don't take time to listen, and I think being a cultural bridge, the most important thing for me has been listening, taking time to ask questions and taking time to listen to both sides, or listen, because I can assume certain things from my perspective, but from someone else's perspective, it actually may be completely the opposite. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> "They're meant to somehow help you, but it was not perceived that way. And so, so having these conversations, deeper conversations" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

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Code Excerpts: AI Pride in Work Ethic

> So basically, to me it was really drilled into my head that you need to take pride of your work, right? No matter if it's just like something big or like just something as simple as like even sweeping someone's floor because coming to the United States I really had like the lowest paying jobs, the lowest ranked jobs and whatnot. So if you if you're sweeping the floor or something as simple as that, its like, I would like to actually really then look back and enjoy it and say I made this better, I'm actually proud of this, it looks great versus just completing the job to take a check box and then get paid a couple bucks. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> Taking pride of what you do, no matter how small your task is. To me one thing that I definitely carry. And you don't, you don't see it everywhere, right. A lot of people are doing their job just to good enough. But you can't really take pride of something that is good enough, right? (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> I'm motivated to do a good job, right? Recognition drives me. I do like the recognition. When it's like done in private, I don't want the validation. My motivation is to do a good job and just, they take pride of that. Being able to be proud for my name to be associated with that. And as a leader, just as a leader, I use the example of success for me. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

Code Excerpts: AI Unorthodox Problem-Solving

> And I think my values were challenged that day. You're not supposed to break rules. You're not supposed to do these things. But I did it anyway. And that was a catalyst towards me taking really huge risks. And I know that you can't take risks all the time. They need to be thought through. It's not rash or brazen, but there are times when it's worth it. And I see in the work that I do now that has become a deep value. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> And challenging a world where we look at numbers. And say yes, I get where that's important, but the one also matters. And I feel very motivated by hearing a person's story because I know it's their story, but they, it's just one of thousands. And I'm compelled by the stories that I hear and compelled to challenge organizations. I get it. We need to look at numbers. We need to look at the masses. But Jesus clearly didn't only serve the masses. And if we backtrack in the Old Testament, God, before He sent His Son, spoke to the masses, but He also served and spoke to individuals. And then those individuals impacted their worlds. So that is something where I feel a huge, tremendous amount of

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> motivation in our current world, whereas an organizations grows and they have to have rules and regulations, you have to have marketing, you have to have all of these different facets. I get it. But to not lose sight of the one, because the one could then go on and influence a humongous amount of people with their life. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> Or am I going to say reframe, reframe this and find another way? And what's the end goal? The end goal to everyone just be frustrated? Or is the end goal we move, even if it's just a baby step, we move in the right direction? And cut myself out of it. Cut my own pride out of it. I've learned. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

Theme Description for Metacognitive Intelligence

Metacognitive intelligence is the ability to be consciously aware amid intercultural experiences, emphasizing the mental capacity to obtain and understand in culturally diverse settings while maintaining self-control and a sober mind (Ng et al., 2009). Ng et al. (2009) expanded this into planning, monitoring, and revising before, during, and after experiences have taken place. Operating with metacognitive cultural intelligence requires high-level thinking and agility on all sides of multicultural encounters. The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 5 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 5: Code Frequencies for Metacognitive Cultural Intelligence

Concept code	Frequency
Cultural discernment	7
AI: Conflict mediation	4

Code Excerpts: Cultural Discernment

> "I think to answer the question of how that has affected me is, I think that I am probably more empathetic to cultural cues and I think that I can more quickly establish someone's motivations or bent or drive" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

> "I could quickly determine kind of strengths and weaknesses and also help understand and mitigate conflict" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

> "I think that I have seen in an international setting that there's a level of cultural awareness that I have that allows me to make negotiations or in building plans develop more value" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

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> "I think growing up as a TCK definitely influenced discernment" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025).

> And so I think that absolutely influences discernment because you're doing that constantly. You're trying to figure out what's true and what isn't? Who's lying and who isn't? What's real and what isn't? And I have no interest in fake stuff. I know I learned that in Austria. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> "For someone like me, an adult, I know how I feel about things. I feel like growing up in another country gives you the advantage of constantly deciphering things. What's real, what isn't" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025).

> Discerning people's motivations too. It gives you a thermostat or something you can tell often when someone is not who they say they are. Or I can tell if there's something about this that I'm not feeling is right. And I know the Bible and the Word and the Holy Spirit help us with discernment as well. But it's helped me wake, make wise decisions. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

Code Excerpts: AI Conflict Mediation

> I am often the de facto or default arbiter between a lot of inter- or intra-team conflicts. I guess that that's just an observation, not necessarily an official role, but I'm often the person that, that helps solve conflicts between different people on the same team. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> I think that a leader's responsibility is to encourage and manage change and help develop an organization by finding what motivates or influences people, and I think that in those settings I am at an advantage because I can quickly learn what does motivate people or what will allow a team to work together well, and I can identify and solve conflicts in, in group settings. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> I remember my mom once in a, in a bakery in Austria. She wanted to buy this cake and it was a significant enough cake and they wouldn't give her a box to carry it. And she said, well, I could, I buy a box? And they said no. And it became this massive argument between them, because my mom didn't understand, I'm going to purchase the box. Why won't you give it to me? And they just, they weren't having it. It got to a point where they're like, you are a loudmouth American and I'm not going to give you a box just because of that. And the entire bakery now was involved. And I'm a 9-year-old standing in there

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> thinking, shut up, Mom, you are being so unwise right now. This is not about winning this argument. You're not going to get anywhere. And you just lost an opportunity to reframe this, change how this is all working if you as the believer had just course corrected in the middle, just redirected something. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> I remember that really impacted me in how I saw or understood a situation. I need to be able to discern when I'm not going to get anywhere with a person. So do I leave that place whatever it looks like? Or am I going to say okay, reframe this and find another way? (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

Theme Description for Cognitive Cultural Intelligence

People with cognitive CQ can anticipate, understand, compare, and contrast elements of cross-cultural scenarios (Ng et al., 2009). The emphasis is on knowledge of diverse social, legal, and economic systems, resulting in accurate expectations and lowered reactionary responses (Ng et al., 2009). The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 6 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 6: Code Frequencies for Cognitive Cultural Intelligence

Concept code	Frequency
Cultural empathy	3
AI: Cultural bridge builder	9

Code Excerpts: Cultural Empathy

> I think to answer the question of how that has affected me is I think that I am probably more empathetic to cultural cues and I think that I'm more, I can more quickly establish someone's kind of motivations or bent or drive. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> That concept or with this way of doing life, and I think it enabled me to empathize, to love better. It enabled me to adjust. And it enabled me to be a bridge because I wasn't bound by the boundaries of like one culture. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> "Because I'm willing and open to listen to other people's motivations and I think that that gets me further than it might than some of my peers in just a purely U.S. situation working with people professionally" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

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Code Excerpts: AI Cultural Bridge Builder

> "But soon enough, both myself and my brother, we spoke Portuguese fluently. And my parents didn't. And so, I was basically the cultural translator for my family" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).
>
> So both without giving away specific details, I can, I can say that in an organizational perspective, it is very easy to be frustrated with other organizations because they operate differently, and so things that you see as common practice and in one organization or not in another. And I could watch a lot of my peers very quickly becoming frustrated with their different nationality counterparts, especially organizationally, because it was hard for them to wrap their minds around that this is a norm for them, even though it's not a norm for me. I don't know if that is a, is a skill that I've, that I've learned or just I think that it has given me. I said empathy before. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)
>
> I was able to like I see even those like my husband and I, we both like, I feel like both of us God gave us this role of being bridges. And even in teams, like I remember when we would go into a new team and there will be people with very difficult personalities that will struggle with people in the team. But then for us, like we just, I felt that because I grew up in a different environment and had exposure to different ways of doing things and ways of thinking and being that enabled me to connect with people better, and it allowed me to speak into people's because I connect with them, then I can speak into their life. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)
>
> "The building bridges factor as a TCK, I think that's always at the forefront for me" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025).
>
> It's, I think my growing up experience definitely informed that bridge building, how to make someone feel safe so that when you're talking about issues, and relationship, to my understanding and my experience in all Middle Eastern countries, is paramount. Nothing happens without relationship. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)
>
> "And so you're constantly trying to find what do I have in common? What do I have in common with these people? Where do I have a place that we connect" (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)?
>
> So that idea of, all right, what do we have in common? What are the things that are our strengths that bond us, not our needs, not where we're faulty, but what are our assets? And I don't even necessarily mean physical ones. Like what do I

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> bring to the table? What do you bring to the table? Let's build on those and let's grow those and let's see what happens to invest in another person's either personal or professional growth by taking and journeying with them again on. All right, so who are you? What made you who you are? Tell me about this resilience that I can see in you. Tell me more about how you, how you became such a great whatever and all right, let's go from there. Rather than focusing what you don't have or what you wish you had or what you need, it's you've got these things already. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> "I started not just hearing my parents' view, but I heard my friends, and I was the bridge. I understood both sides. I started understanding both ways and both sides and I realized" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> That was really important. It's difficult to know how to resolve conflict if you don't take time to listen, and I think being a cultural bridge, the most important thing for me has been listening, like listening, taking time to ask questions and taking time to listen to both sides, or listen, because I can assume certain things from my perspective, but from someone else's perspective, it actually may be completely the opposite. They may be trying to help you when you think that they're trying to hurt you. I think taking time to ask questions, taking time to listen. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

Theme Description for Motivational Cultural Intelligence

The ability to cope with unfamiliar dynamic situations by focusing on what can be learned from the apparent cultural differences is motivational CQ (Ng et al., 2009). There are two types of motivation: intrinsic, including self-efficacy, and extrinsic (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016; Ng et al., 2009). Intrinsically motivated individuals seek challenges and push themselves into exploration to expand capacities through learning (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016), which produces self-confidence about interacting in diverse, dynamic situations (Ng et al., 2009). In contrast, external motivation aims to meet a goal outside the work (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016), depending on someone or something else to foster determination toward achievement. The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 7 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 7: Code Frequencies for Motivational Cultural Intelligence

Concept code	Frequency
Motivation	4
Journeying with others	4
Empathy and perspective-taking	6

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Code Excerpts: Motivation 3

> "As a leader, what motivates me is beyond transactional. It's more of an it's all about the people and the relationships" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025).

> "It's like really, I'm motivated to basically be to do a good job, right" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025).

> I'm compelled by the stories that I hear and compelled to challenge organizations that yes, I get it. We need to look at numbers. We need to look at the masses. But Jesus clearly didn't only serve the masses. So that is something where I feel a huge, tremendous amount of motivation in our current world where organizations have to have rules and regulations. But to not lose sight of the one, because the one could then go on and influence a humongous amount of people with their life. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> "She, they had not raised hardly any funds. I mean, they're leaving in May, right? And I'm thinking they had a huge budget and she looked at me and I don't know, it's just like faith from God" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

Code Excerpts: Journeying With Others

> I learned so much from Mother Teresa and her staff through that, just watching them. And getting that opportunity, and that has definitely motivated me this idea of journeying, and when I look at my friends in Gaza now and the ones who we were able to evacuate for higher purposes. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> And getting that opportunity, and that has definitely motivated me, this idea of journeying, and when I look at my friends in Gaza now and the ones who we were able to evacuate for higher purposes. Journeying with them through bombings. I'm getting messages: "I'm being, we're being bombed now." We're saying goodbye to one another on WhatsApp numerous, numerous, numerous times. And yet, we have these conversations sealed forever. We were there with each other, couldn't be there in person, but we journeyed, and I feel like some that value of journeying with someone staying with them can look so many different ways, but it's the idea that we're with them, we're committed. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

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> Either personal or professional growth by taking and journeying with them again. All right, so who are you? What made you who you are? Tell me about this resilience that I can see in you. Tell me more about how you, how you became such a great whatever and all right, let's go from there. Rather than focusing what you don't have or what you wish you had or what you need, it's you've got these things already. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

> And again, I feel like I'm keep coming back to a similar concept, but it wasn't there, I didn't know these men and women's language. She had me sit. The nurses there had me sit with men and women, and they allowed me to hold their hand. And these were men and women who were on their last breaths. And share space with them. And even though we couldn't communicate with a language, I would talk to them in English. They probably didn't understand. I was crying. They were crying. The physical touch, how much that matters, the dignity. Of sitting with someone in their time of need. They don't need advice. They don't need all the things, just the journeying and the sitting. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

Code Excerpts: Empathy and Perspective-Taking

> "I think my childhood has enabled me, number one, that I can empathize with different cultures" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

> I think to answer the question of how that has affected me is, I think that I am probably more empathetic to cultural cues and I think that I'm more, I can more quickly establish someone's kind of motivations or bent or drive. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)

> I was able to glean the best of every, of every worldview and of every perspective, and that actually enabled me to love people better. Like I felt that I love people better because I could understand why they were suffering. I understood why they were breaking the law when those that were rule-based, they were like, no, they have to do this. But I understood from their perspective why they were doing this. So, it enabled me to even share the gospel more effectively, just because I knew what they were struggling with when it came to the gospel and why they were struggling. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> Experiencing multiple cultures is honestly the best thing that happened to me in my life. Honestly, you grow, you grow with a lot of preconceived notions, right? I would like to feel that my situation is very, very unique because I come from a very unique place, right. But like basically that's me. But just because historically

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> and culturally you have some enemies, for example, as countries and wars. You make assumptions about these people. And I think coming to the USA, especially going to college and then really, really like mingling with so many people from every single part of the world, I think it's a beautiful thing because then you really realize that we're all the same, and even if you actually go on a macro level like geopolitically. I think you can actually carry that experience to an organization. You can really find out that it's like people are people and like they all want the same thing. They're all good. And then you also have some people with bad tendencies as well. They have the same motivations that all they want to do is just have a good life. And they have nothing personal against anybody because of who they are. They just haven't been exposed, I think, and they just haven't been able to actually really understand the difference. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> I think taking time to ask questions, taking time to listen. I've learned giving people the benefit of the doubt because we can assume a lot of things from our own little position or perspective or experience, but until you ask them and talk to them, you will never know the truth from their perspective. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

> I realized the value and I realized how hard it is to have those conversations, and sometimes people are not always open to that. But I know how valuable it is just to communicate. To communicate, to be open, to listen and not go in with judgment. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

Theme Description for Behavioral Cultural Intelligence

Behavioral CQ is the ability to operate appropriately for a broad spectrum of stations and exhibit culturally appropriate "words, tones, gestures, and facial expressions" (Ng et al., 2009, p. 515). A person who acts according to rules acceptable in a unique cultural setting and adjusts to dynamic environments operates at a high level of behavioral intelligence (Erez et al., 2013). Behavioral CQ includes dexterity in verbal and nonverbal communication, drilling down to gestures and facial expressions that are nuanced from culture to culture (Erez et al., 2013). The concept codes contained within the theme are included in Table 8 (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Table 8: Code Frequencies for Behavioral Cultural Intelligence

Concept code	Frequency
AI: Environmental awareness	2
AI: Collective interdependence	3
AI: Rapid integration skills	4

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Concept code	Frequency
Language	10

Code Excerpts: AI Environmental Awareness

> Coming from a small country that is always basically geographically and geopolitically, it's in a place where we have to be like always aware of our surroundings, the superpowers, because we don't have the leverage. Whereas in the United States, we have all the leverage. People will interview someone in America and they'll ask them like, so where, where is the country, Bolivia or whatever? And they don't know. Well, they shouldn't know. They wouldn't know, right? Why? Because America is a gravitational force and the whole world gravitates around it. I think coming up from a country where I need to know who is my enemy and make sure that they're also our friends because I can't even defend myself even if they know that they're enemies. So, you need to be like really political. You don't need to be diplomatic. You need to make sure that you kind of understand the leverage. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> So I'm hyper aware in situations and, for example, even to me as a leader, even body language, I can tell you how many times even on Zoom I see a smile or a smirk. I'll actually reach out to this person after that just to find out what's going on. It's nonverbal. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

Code Excerpts: Collective Interdependence

> And I think the other thing, I think when you're coming up from a culture and really a place of struggle is that you really understand that you have to, you have to rely on people. So, for me, it's always very important always to kind of this kind of like a camaraderie. That you basically need to take care of people. So, I think for me as a leader, that's the only reason why honestly, I'm in leadership. Otherwise, I would much rather be just like doing a job of as an expert and not really managing people. But I do enjoy. I really like to take care of people. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)

> Different cultural differences like in, in the United States, the culture is very individualistic. Everybody knows that they don't have to depend on their neighbor, right? You just take care of it. You go hire someone, right? This has been changing with globalization. In Bulgaria, your neighbor was anything. You couldn't do anything without people because you had no resources. So, I think this sort of like a resource constraint really teaches you to tap into people and really understand how it's not just transactional between people. But it's more of

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> a long-term camaraderie that you need to create with people. I call it the favors economy. (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025)
>
> "So as a leader, I definitely think that, kind of going back to this explanation about the neighbors, creating your tribe. I think it's just like really as a leader what motivates me is beyond transactional" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025).

Code Excerpts: Rapid Integration Skills

> "It's very easy for me to integrate into a multinational team" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).
>
> Capable of interacting with people from other cultures very, very easily and naturally, where some of our peers might be able to operate in a professional sense or a strictly individual sense that they're just gregarious people or outgoing people. But I think that I can get into a quick professional relationship with other personnel because I'm used to that sort of thing. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)
>
> I think that, that for me personally, it masks a lot of my introvertedness. I am by nature an introverted person and I would prefer just to be by myself or a small group of people, but I think that the concrete experience or the actual output is I typically work very well in, in a team and I'm, and I'm integrated into teams whether I'm in charge or just a member very quickly. (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025)
>
> "From one place the norm for food, dress, vernacular is different than another place, and I think that I can integrate quickly because of those experiences" (Participant 2, personal communication, July 22, 2025).

Code Excerpts: Language

> "And early on, I remember my parents just telling me that I needed to learn as many languages as possible" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).
>
> "I remember sitting in kindergarten and just marveling at the people around me speaking this different language, eating this different food and doing different activities (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025).
>
> I think growing up once we moved to Vienna, my world opened up even more. First it was this new environment. New language, you become fluent. We were

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in this small village and then that expands to this metropolitan city where we're now attending an international school where I could still continue my German. I got both degrees when I graduated, the Austrian diploma as well as the American one. But it just expanded that worldview even more, because now I was in this little microcosm of attendees of this school, students being from all over literally the world. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)

But my dad really wanted our whole family to speak Hakka and not just Mandarin, because Mandarin is the standard language for all education, right? He did not want me just to learn Mandarin. He wanted us to learn Hakka because he felt that we needed to understand first our own culture and even regardless of where you are in the world, you're always, he always told me you're always going to look Asian, and so you need to know and understand your culture. And so that was a beautiful thing. My dad had definitely foresight because I know how difficult it is to maintain a language when you are not in your home country. And he really made a point. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

"So, then I started learning English and taking English as a foreign language at a kind of special school. So, I was already early on doing three languages. And because of that, I just naturally always enjoyed languages" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

"And so, I think that is part when I think about my growing-up years, that is part of my love for culture, my love for languages, and I'm able to see it, like it blends together" (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025).

I just loved hearing about different cultures and then hearing different languages. And I often would hear like Hakka Portuguese. Then I would watch movies in Brazil and all the movies are from Hollywood, so English. That was already like I was already constantly exposed to different languages, different cultures and my parents definitely were a big part of it. (Participant 1, personal communication, July 16, 2025)

So I definitely feel motivated by that. I served in Mother Teresa's Home of the Destitute and Dying when I was 19. I at that time thought I was called to India. Not long after I arrived, the Lord spoke very clearly that India was not the place and I pretty much broke down and did not want that to be the answer because I fell in love with it while I was there. But serving in her Home of the Destitute and Dying, it left a huge impact on motivation for me. I didn't know these men and women's language. She had me sit. The nurses there had me sit with men and women, and they allowed me to hold their hand. And these were men and

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> women who were on their last breaths. And share space with them. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)
>
> And even though we couldn't communicate with a language, I would talk to them in English. They probably didn't understand. I was crying. They were crying. The physical touch, how much that matters, the dignity. Of sitting with someone in their time of need. They don't need advice. They don't need all the things, just the journeying and the sitting. (Participant 3, personal communication, July 24, 2025)
>
> "I know the language and the culture, but I also don't anymore" (Participant 4, personal communication, July 28, 2025).

Discussion

Empirical literature on ATCKs indicated that behaviors learned through experiences, signified by the ELT during developmental years, implicate the acquisition of CQ (Erez et al., 2013; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Selmer & Lauring, 2014). However, the literature lacked a connection between ELT and CQ in ACTKs as a professional advantage over mono-culturally raised peers in globalized leadership scenarios. The present research focused on gleaning lived experiences from ACTKs who work on leadership teams in multi-national organizations. This research is important because it synthesized theoretical constructs with lived experiences to examine why and how developmental events can confer professional advantages to extend empirical and practical literature.

As explained in the methods and procedures section, qualitative data were collected through interviews with four ATCKs who shared lived encounters, answering three deep-level questions:

1. How do you feel your developmental experiences from your childhood and adolescence contributed to your globalized identity and cross-cultural leadership skillsets?
2. How have concrete experiences and learning in formative years impacted your values, motivation, and perceived levels of cultural intelligence?
3. How does your upbringing as a TCK influence your ability to discern what is happening in dynamic cultural scenarios and act appropriately to resolve conflict with diverse team members in the workplace?

The interviews were followed by an analysis of the data to extract concept codes aligned with literature-based themes, cultivating empirical evidence to answer the following research question: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than

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the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios?

Answer to Research Question

RQ: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios?

The analysis of data resulted in 25 concept codes embedded in eight empirically grounded themes that illuminated the advantage of ACTKs in globalized leadership settings as a result of learning experiences in developmental years that generated the acquisition of cultural intelligence. Using the theoretical construct's elements as themes framed the high-frequency codes, which resulted in three skills all participants articulated as learned behaviors, cultivating cultural intelligence and professional advantages in globalized leadership scenarios that answer the research question:

Themes:

- Concrete experience
- Abstract conceptualization
- Reflective observation
- Active experimentation
- Metacognitive cultural intelligence
- Cognitive cultural intelligence
- Motivational cultural intelligence
- Behavioral cultural intelligence

Emergent skills:

- Observation
- Empathy
- Intuition

Concrete Experience

The theme concrete experience helps answer the research question by highlighting how individuals raised in multiple cultural contexts accumulate diverse, tangible experiences during their formative years that others cannot replicate. These immediate, lived experiences across different cultural settings provide them with firsthand knowledge of varied social norms, communication styles, and problem-solving approaches. When leading global organizations, these concrete experiences enable more intuitive navigation of cross-cultural complexities and adaptation to diverse stakeholder

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needs, giving them a practical advantage over peers whose experiential learning has been limited to a single cultural context (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Abstract Conceptualization

The theme of abstract conceptualization helps answer the research question by highlighting how individuals with cross-cultural upbringings develop enhanced reflective capabilities that become leadership assets. Through intentional reflection on their diverse cultural experiences, these individuals transform concrete experiences into symbolic understanding, enabling them to conceptualize leadership challenges from multiple perspectives. This reflective processing of cross-cultural experiences creates cognitive frameworks that allow global leaders to navigate complexity, interpret diverse scenarios, and develop more nuanced approaches to leadership in globalized contexts than peers without such varied cultural exposure (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Reflective Observation

Reflective observation helps answer the research question by illuminating how individuals with cross-cultural upbringings develop a heightened capacity for thoughtful processing of diverse experiences. This internal reflection allows them to transform childhood encounters with different cultural contexts into actionable leadership insights and approaches. Their ability to consciously process cultural differences through reflection creates a metacognitive advantage, enabling them to better understand varied perspectives, anticipate cultural challenges, and adapt their leadership style accordingly in globalized organizational settings (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Active Experimentation

The theme of active experimentation helps answer the research question because individuals with cross-cultural upbringings have had opportunities to actively experiment with different cultural behaviors, norms, and approaches in authentic contexts. This practical experience of testing, adapting, and refining behaviors across cultural boundaries develops a heightened ability to translate cultural understanding into effective leadership action in globalized organizations. Unlike peers raised only in their country of birth, these individuals have already practiced the behavioral flexibility required to operate across cultural divides, giving them a distinct advantage in implementing culturally appropriate leadership strategies in diverse organizational settings (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

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Metacognitive Cultural Intelligence

Metacognitive CQ directly addresses the leadership advantage gained through cross-cultural upbringing by enabling leaders to consciously process and adapt to diverse cultural contexts. Those raised across multiple cultures develop an enhanced capacity to plan for cultural differences, monitor their assumptions and behaviors during cross-cultural interactions, and revise their approaches based on accumulated experiences. This cognitive agility becomes a significant advantage in globalized leadership scenarios, as these individuals can anticipate cultural challenges, remain self-aware during complex multicultural encounters, and continuously refine their leadership approach; skills that are less developed in those exposed only to their birth culture (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Cognitive Cultural Intelligence

The theme of cognitive CQ contributes to answering the research question by illuminating how individuals raised across multiple cultures develop enhanced knowledge frameworks of diverse social, legal, and economic systems. This cross-cultural upbringing fosters an ability to anticipate and understand cultural differences in globalized organizational contexts, leading to more accurate expectations and fewer reactionary responses when navigating complex international leadership scenarios. Such cognitive advantages provide these individuals with superior cultural sense-making capabilities compared to peers raised exclusively in their birth country, positioning them to more effectively lead in globalized organizational environments (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

Motivational Cultural Intelligence

Motivational CQ directly addresses the research question by highlighting how individuals raised across cultures develop a distinctive ability to navigate unfamiliar situations, a critical leadership advantage in global organizations. Their cross-cultural upbringing fostered stronger intrinsic motivation, building a desire to seek out cultural challenges and learning opportunities rather than avoiding them. This cultivated self-efficacy translates into greater confidence when leading diverse teams and managing complex international scenarios. Unlike peers raised in a single culture, these individuals have repeatedly practiced engaging with cultural differences, developing an internal drive for cultural exploration that becomes particularly valuable when leading in globalized organizational contexts where adaptive motivation is essential (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

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Behavioral Cultural Intelligence

The theme of behavioral CQ directly addresses the research question by highlighting how individuals raised in multiple cultural contexts develop superior adaptability in communication and interpersonal behaviors. Those with cross-cultural upbringings naturally acquire the ability to modify their verbal and nonverbal expressions according to different cultural norms, giving them a distinct advantage in global leadership scenarios where such flexibility is crucial. This behavioral dexterity, developed through formative experiences across cultures, enables these leaders to connect authentically with diverse teams, navigate complex international interactions, and demonstrate appropriate cultural expressions that mono-cultural peers would need to consciously learn later in life (Intellectus Statistics, 2025).

In summary, the answer to the research question is that upbringing in a culture outside one's passport country cultivates cultural intelligence learned through experience. ATCKs possess the ability to empathize with others by using their ability to see themselves and others with an open mind. This competency is cultivated through concrete developmental experiences in community and school settings where the ATCK overcame a relational or cultural disadvantage by employing keen observation to discern before acting through reflective observation and active experimentation. Additionally, individual and spiritual experiences influence the development of cultural intelligence through abstract conceptualization that equips ATCKs to intuitively interpret what is taking place in a complex scenario at multiple levels simultaneously. These skills obtained in childhood are activated for success in leadership and management in diverse scenarios (Wolfe, 2024).

The answer to the research question confirms that living in a foreign culture during developmental years placed the learning environment in a live setting for ATCKs facing real problems generating metacognitive and cognitive intelligence. Conflict resolution is a strength developed through educational and relational opportunities that required them as children to mitigate disagreements and misunderstandings both as individuals and in collective circumstances. Motivational CQ proved to be developed through concrete experiences that fostered compassion, resulting in motivation to operationalize empathy in leadership. The ATCKs' ability to intuitively apply or withhold appropriate verbal and nonverbal responses based on an assessment of a situation, illustrated behavioral CQ. The skills developed became part of their core processes, making them intuitive versus something gleaned from corporate training (Wolfe, 2024).

Furthermore, the answer to the research question progresses with cultural influences from childhood, fostering diplomacy through verbal responses and nonverbal approaches to globalized leadership settings. ATCKs are capable of entering a context with observation as their initial action and employing relational connections through

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empathy to diffuse conflict and reach equitable solutions in diverse work groups, reducing reactionary responses. Learning through experiences in developmental years cultivates core competencies in observation, empathy, and intuition, creating an advantage for ATCKs in globalized leadership settings (Wolfe, 2024).

Contribution to Scholarly Literature

The literature revealed a connection converging in ATCKs between the ELT and CQ. Learning experiences are intentionally cultivated while engaging participants to actively develop intellectually and emotionally (Erez et al., 2013). When ELT is applied to cultural aptitude, the formation of CQ is affirmed. CQ carries capacities for learning that enhance the translation of expatriate vocational experiences into desired learning outcomes through ELT functions of "experiencing, reflecting, observing, and experimenting" (Ng et al., 2009, p. 514). The multicultural experiences of ACTKs are linked to the development of CQ, equipping them to handle adjustment and integration in host cultures with keen awareness, a skill unnatural in mono-cultural adults (Selmer & Lauring, 2014). The dynamic environment of multinational organizations is due to heterogeneous cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and expectations (Erez et al., 2013), which necessitate leaders to operate with a high level of CQ. ATCKs have the advantage to succeed, even lead, in multi-cultural and diverse industries when learned experiences are transformed into high levels of cultural intelligence, giving them a potential advantage over mono-cultural peers.

There is a deficit of empirical evidence available about why and how ATCKs, those who have spent a portion or all of their childhood in a country other than their passport (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), who hold the potential to advantage in this arena, could thrive as set apart from peers raised in a mono-cultural setting. A gap exists in using ELT to compare the acquisition of CQ post-childhood from those raised solely in their passport country and those who develop CQ over time through adolescence, immersed in a foreign context. The present research indicated three thematic foci that add value to the empirical literature: observation, empathy, and intuition.

Adding to the ELT concepts, this study revealed that the four phases of ELT—experiencing, reflecting, observing, and experimenting (Ng et al., 2009)—take place in a diverse, even adverse environment. The interactions and experiences between people and environments launch learning. For ACTKs, these occur in culturally complex atmospheres, cultivating reflection and observation that includes concepts, worldviews, values, sights, smells, and sounds abstract to those raised in a mono-cultural setting. Participants in this investigation articulated as adults that the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, observing, and experimenting is active, almost organic, as they apply the core processes they gained through childhood to professional scenarios. The theoretical elements of the ELT were confirmed through participant testimonies. The unique value

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is that the ATCKs' approaches consistently included keen observation skills, generous empathy, and natural intuition to successfully problem-solve, mitigate conflict, and lead in diverse scenarios versus their mono-cultural counterparts.

Additionally, CQ can be learned (Ng et al., 2009). CQ is the ability to function and manage culturally diverse scenarios effectively (Ng et al., 2009); however, the learning platform influences the lifespan of the skillsets. Obtaining CQ in developmental years anchors these elements in the intellectual and emotional core processes of thought and action (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The key difference is that ATCKs learn CQ in their developmental years through lived experiences in cultures outside their passport country.

Moreover, contributions to the literature on the four aspects of CQ—metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral—were realized. Metacognitive CQ is the ability to be consciously aware during intercultural experiences, with the mental capacity to understand diverse situations while maintaining a sound mind and sober actions (Ng et al., 2009). Participants shared examples from developmental years where metacognitive CQ was obtained through experiences having to navigate culturally complex scenarios. Instances where active reflection and evaluation, a hallmark of metacognitive CQ, were cultivated to take place before, during, and after instances due to the level of uncertainty and the need to survive situations from childhood. Mental agility in ATCKs was confirmed as an acquired skill through testimonies of observation and intuition assisting in problem-solving and diplomacy in corporate settings. What differentiates ATCKs is that metacognitive CQ flowed in a natural manner out of who they are (core processes) versus an applied skill from a training module.

Cognitive CQ fosters knowledge of social, legal, and economic systems diversity, producing adequate expectations and reduced reactionary responses (Ng et al., 2009). People with cognitive CQ can appropriately understand, anticipate, compare, and contrast cross-cultural circumstances (Ng et al., 2009). The present research affirmed the scope and application of cognitive CQ in ATCKs as immediate, innate responses to culturally complex and problem-wrought scenarios. Consistently, the ATCKs interviewed expressed situations where they were called upon to mitigate conflict and interpret miscommunication because their value of empathy caused them to operate with the ability to discern situations and read people with equity and honesty. The ATCKs' reduced reactionary responses to adverse situations or stress inoculation elevated them in the eyes of their peers and employers as persons able to constructively mitigate conflict and reach holistic compromise.

Furthermore, motivational CQ is the ability to cope with dynamic, unfamiliar situations by concentrating on what can be learned from observed differences, encompassing internal and external components (Holtbrugge & Engelhard, 2016; Ng et al., 2009).

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Interviewees expressed strong internal motivation anchored to family values and spiritual experiences due to the changing nature of their external circumstances. Internal values grounded in family standards and religion were nurtured over time to become more important than external motivators because they were the only consistent value factor. Although the literature presents internal and external motivation as equal parts of motivational CQ, participants in this study expressed their motivation almost exclusively as internal. The ability to thrive in alien situations was sourced from central values established through developmental experiences, not the desire to meet a corporate goal or compensation.

Operating appropriately within a broad spectrum of situations through verbal and nonverbal actions is behavioral CQ (Ng et al., 2009). High levels of behavioral CQ cause individuals to understand and, therefore, act with acceptable rules in unique cultural settings, including finite elements such as verbal tone, gestures, and facial expressions (Erez et al., 2013). Behavioral CQ acquired in childhood through finding diplomatic solutions for renegade peers from a completely different culture can become the intuitive ability to reason with terrorist border agents to transport aid into crises. Interpreting for family members from a first language to a third language through immigration can cultivate empathy to include all participants in a given scenario. Allowing individuals to operate in the values inherent to a culture is developed through observing conflict when one culture asserts its dominance, inappropriately hindering the ability to collaborate. Behavioral CQ became intuitive because it was learned through developmental experiences, producing strategic skillsets in a global leadership position.

The professional advantage for ACTKs that ELT reveals is that lived experiences cultivate CQ in their core processes, meaning it is not just a skill they have, it is a part of who they are. Cognitive and emotional intelligence source out of diverse developmental experiences, advantaging ATCKs in situations requiring conflict resolution, high understanding, diversity management, and cultural dexterity. The interviewees each testified to CQ as a result of developmental experiences they had reflected upon and experimented with, applying principles to present leadership settings. The added value to the empirical literature holds implications for practical application unique to diverse organizational leadership.

Contribution to Practitioner Literature

The present investigation affirmed and extended the empirical literature on ELT and CQ for the ATCK demographic. Likewise, practitioner literature asserts that CQ can be learned through tailored methods and applied across vocations (Erez et al., 2013; Thomas & Inkson, 2017). The demographic focus of this study shows that what would take a significant investment of resources into a mono-cultural employee (Thomas &

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Inkson, 2017), exists organically through experiential learning in ATCKs. The ATCK advantage is that observation, empathy, and intuition are skillsets of the individual's core processes (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) and, therefore, approach a vocation or situation with innate competencies, which requires less training and resource investment.

According to Winston (2018), competence results in higher job performance. The premise of Thomas and Inkson (2017) is that education can train an individual to develop CQ proficiency, as affirmed by Erez et al. (2013). The present research highlights that ATCKs, as practitioners, come to the job with cultural intelligence as a core process. ATCKs enter a corporate scenario equipped to manage diversity due to their innate competencies to observe, empathize, and act with intuition in culturally complex situations. Communication, for example, is a barrier all organizations must overcome (Thomas & Inkson, 2017). From this study emerged themes solidifying the communication competency that ATCKs develop through experiential learning, assisting them as adults to interpret, mitigate conflict, and discern, both verbally and nonverbally, what is taking place in a challenging situation.

Furthermore, connected to talent acquisition and ongoing professional development, ATCKs have potential for higher job performance due to their experience and aptitude to successfully navigate dynamic situations with diverse groups. Cross-cultural managers with high CQ operate with greater adaptability and functionality in unfamiliar environments (Vlajčić et al., 2019). Training for mono-cultural colleagues who do not yet possess CQ would not be needed, at least not at the same origin point. Therefore, organizations could save economically by employing ATCKs who need less education in the areas related to CQ and diversity management. Additionally, fostering an inclusive corporate culture cannot be instituted through training alone; training is not designed to carry the weight of culture change (Moodian, 2009). Employing individuals with CQ competencies could infuse the organizational culture with operational empathy and diplomacy, two values central to an inclusive work environment capable of valuing associates for unique skillsets and managing diversity (Mor Barak, 2016). There is a potential economic advantage for globalized organizations to employ ATCKs.

Limitations of this Study

Limitations of the present research surface in the sampling method. Convenience sampling was employed for accessibility and availability; therefore, three participants were known personally to me, and one was connected through a colleague (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). Although no appearance of bias was revealed in the answers provided by interviewees, additional research could expand this study to ATCKs that are not directly associated with the investigator.

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Additionally, participants' faith foundation in formative years was varied, including Confucian Buddhism, Orthodoxy, and Western Christianity. Further study could intentionally gather purposeful participants who adhered to or were intimately influenced by other world religions in developmental years. Data collected on the impact of spiritual experiences from a diversity of religious worldviews could bolster the depth and generalizability of this study (Miles et al., 2020).

Recommendations to Extend the Literature

Theory

The current literature on the ELT covers extensively intellectual and emotional aspects of leading (Erez et al., 2013). However, from the present qualitative research, there emerged testimonies of the influence of spiritual experiences in developmental years. Participants shared how their various faith backgrounds shaped their developmental experiences and, subsequently, their motives, values, and ability to succeed professionally in culturally dynamic situations. There is a limited amount of study on spiritual experiences as a direct mechanism of experiential learning and their impact on adult behavior. The work of Veselský et al. (2013) discovered a connection; however, the project did not produce a theoretical measurement or practitioner applications for organizational leadership. Additional research on experiential learning could include the construct of spiritual experiences as a unique element of the ELT. Investigations could seek to discover how spiritual experiences in developmental years impact adult CQ acumen and leadership competencies for ATCKs.

Practice

Although practitioner literature affirmed the purpose and provided methods of why and how to provide training for individuals to obtain CQ (Thomas & Inkson, 2017), there is a gap in the practitioner literature that includes individuals who arrive with global competencies, versus mono-cultural employees who begin a role with less developed skillsets in this genre. To extend resources on the value of ATCKs in diverse leadership scenarios, the question can be posed: If this demographic exists, how are they being equipped and engaged to actualize into leadership roles in a globalized organizational setting? Further investigation could be conducted to obtain empirical data to discover if ATCKs have a professional advantage in diversity management. Studies could focus on the tangible elements that support the success of ATCKs in dynamic environments and be synthesized into principles of hiring and professional development practices. A possible result is a framework of competencies employers can source to obtain individuals capable of managing diversity and cultivating an inclusive corporate culture from the point of hire. An outcome could be an increased pace of corporate culture change toward workforce global competency if an organization does

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not have to rely on training alone, but rather intentionally employs individuals skilled in the areas necessary to successfully manage diversity.

Conclusion

This investigation intended to extend the current literature by utilizing the ELT with the concepts of CQ with ATCKs to answer the research question: Why does upbringing in a country or culture other than the individual's passport add an advantage over peers raised only in their country of birth to leadership in globalized organizational leadership scenarios? Experiential learning has proven to cultivate competencies that become part of an individual's core processes (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). The lived experiences of the participants in this study affirmed the theoretical validity of the ELT and the constructs of CQ as aspects of professional acumen. Twenty-five concept codes were identified and distilled into eight literature-based themes. The content codes supported the themes, which resulted in three skills: observation, empathy, and intuition. For ATCKs, the skillsets developed advantage them ahead of their mono-culturally raised peers to lead in culturally dynamic organizations. Further research could extend the theoretical literature by investigating aspects of spiritual learning and practitioner literature by developing frameworks for organizations to intentionally employ ATCKs toward an inclusive culture and keen aptitude to manage diversity.

About the Author

Rev. Elizabeth Wolfe is a PhD candidate in organizational leadership through Regent University's School of Business and Leadership with a concentration in entrepreneurial leadership. Elizabeth's projected completion date is May 2026. Elizabeth has worked as a people leader of diverse work teams for 20 years in four countries on three continents in not-for-profit organizations, organizational development, and human resources. Elizabeth recently founded the Wolfe Leadership Group consulting firm. Additionally, Elizabeth has served as an adjunct professor at Evangel University since 2022 and has been ordained since 2012. Elizabeth's research interests include design thinking, entrepreneurialism, emerging contexts, globalization, organizational development, and human resources.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Rev. Elizabeth Wolfe, 2137 S. Poseyville Rd, Midland, MI 48640; www.linkedin.com/in/elizabethswolfe; Email: wolfee@evangel.edu

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Exploring Why Managing Followers Resist New Senior Leadership in High Senior Leader Turnover Environments

April E. Briant
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

Followers with managerial responsibility, referred to as managing followers, often resist, work against, or wait out their senior leaders in environments with frequent turnover of the senior leaders. This phenomenon results in diminished performance and difficulty in implementing important initiatives. Research as to the cause of this phenomenon is largely absent (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134). Learning the cause of this phenomenon will impact sectors prone to high senior leader turnover many of which are responsible for the well-being of society, including technology, non-profits, retail, healthcare, military, public education, and some industry (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134). Qualitative research conducted on six participants from the United States via Zoom regarding their experiences in a wide range of private, public, and government sectors of all sizes that demonstrated root causes of this phenomenon have strong connections to Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model stages of grief, the implicit leadership theory's prototype of leadership (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397), and the leader–member exchange dyadic working relationship (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). Further research is recommended.

Keywords: leader–member exchange dyadic relationship, grief, implicit leadership theory

Followers with managerial responsibility, referred to as managing followers, have often been observed to resist, work against, or wait out their senior leaders in organizations with frequent turnover among senior leaders. This phenomenon results in lack of performance and difficulty in implementing important initiatives for the organization, yet there is a lack of decisive research on the cause of this phenomenon or the specific phenomenon itself (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134). This phenomenon demands research as a

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number of sectors are prone to senior leader turnover who have vital work to accomplish for the well-being of society, technology, non-profits, retail, healthcare, military, public education, churches, and some industry (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134).

Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model outlines the common stages of grief individuals go through as they experience significant life change, such as managing followers may be processing due to loss of the outgoing senior leader. The implicit leadership theory (ILTL) explores the "lay images of leadership" or prototype of senior leaders managing followers formed in the environment of high senior management turnover, which may be impacting their willingness to follow the current senior leader (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397). The leader–member exchange (LMX) measures the quality of the dyadic working relationship between the current senior leader and managing follower and explores potential causes for the same (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). The research question for this study is: Why do manager followers in organizations with high turnover of senior leadership often resist, work against, or wait out the incoming or current senior leader?

Literature Review

Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model helps us explore why a managing follower may be acting from a place of unprocessed grief and the emotions associated with that, which are interruptive to their followership of the incoming senior leader (Tyrrell et al., 2024, p. 1). ILT allows the study to explore the preconceived ideas that managing followers formed of the senior leader, why those prototypes were formed within the managing follower, and the impact that those expectations have on their willingness to follow the leadership of the incoming senior leader (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397). LMX measures the quality of the current dyadic relationships that develop between the leader and each managing follower, helping discover the reason and impact of the current LMX (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413).

Exploring how Managing Followers may be Acting From a Place of Unprocessed Grief

When followers lose their senior leader, depending on the attachment each follower has to that senior leader, a change with varying degrees of grief occurs for those managing followers. The managing followers may be experiencing grief even if they questioned the leader's ability or qualifications, as attachments occur from that senior leader being the one who was present during a crucial time in their life. The Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model is a tool for "understanding the psychological reaction to imminent death" that she observed in her patients (Tyrrell et al., 2024, p. 1). This model identifies

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denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as the five stages of grief, which are normal to experience as one processes a significant life change, such as the turnover of senior leaders may have on managing followers (Tyrrell et al., 2024, p. 1). Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) contended that these stages of grief are not always experienced in a linear fashion (p. 7). The Kubler-Ross change curve helped the study explore the potential emotional state of managing followers grieving the changes that occurred when the previous senior leader left, which may contribute to their resistance to following the incoming or current senior leader. This literature on the Kubler-Ross change curve and the research question led to the following interview question for participants:

> IQ1: How does the arrival of the current senior leader bring up feelings you may have about the last senior leader leaving in a way that either increases or decreases your willingness to follow their leadership?

Since being published in 1969, the change curve has been shown by Kubler-Ross and others to be applicable whenever grief is experienced due to significant change; therefore, it has become a useful instrument in change management (Shoolin, 2010, p. 286; Tyrrell et al., 2024, p. 1). Kubler-Ross passionately emphasized the benefit of those impacted by the loss of being allowed to discuss and participate in preparation for the loss (Forward).

Criticism of the change curve model points out that there are multiple ways for people to process change (Avis et al., 2021, p. 1). Tyrrell et al. (2024) detailed four other models of processing grief that have emerged—each of which includes elements of Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve (p. 1). Research needs to be conducted exploring the factors that connect people to one another and to circumstances that contribute to the varying levels of grief they experience when they experience loss of those people or those circumstances (e.g., connection to their own identity). Additional research is needed to discover why the loss of senior leaders results in varying levels of grief for followers and the impact this has on the organization, the followers, and the outgoing and incoming senior leaders. More studies need to be conducted that explore the impact of opportunities for followers to face and process grief regarding changes within the organization hosted by the organization and the negative consequences of followers not processing their grief. The literature on the Kubler-Ross change curve method, considering the research question, prompted the following interview question asked of the participants:

> IQ2: How were you given the opportunity to process your grief about the previous senior leader leaving in a way that either increased or decreased your willingness and ability to follow the incoming senior leader?

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Exploring the Impact of Preconceived Prototypes of Leaders Managing Followers Develop

The preconceived ideas that managing followers have of the senior leader prototype may influence the level at which they are willing to support and follow the incoming senior leader. ILT explores the "lay images of leadership" that are created through individual experiences as well as social conditioning (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397). When an individual is perceived as a leader, as well as the type of leader that individual is believed to be, it influences results for the "individual, the team," and the "organizational outputs" (Lord et al., 2020, p. 50). There are "variations" in the "implicit ways" that followers perceive leaders (Offermann et al., 1994, p. 43). Hogan et al. (1990) demonstrated that "certain kinds of people" who have "identifiable personality characteristics" that are harmful often work their way up to leadership within an organization (p. 343). Offermann et al. (1994) examined various stimuli and factors that contribute to perceptions that followers have of leaders (p. 43). Bryman (1987) studied the cultural implications of ILT, which confirm ILT's generalizability (p. 129). Schyns et al. (2011) called for future discovery to better understand how leader and follower prototypes are shaped and what their implications are (p. 397).

Offermann et al. (1994), Hogan et al. (1990), Bryman (1987), Schyns et al. (2011), and Lord et al. (2020) explored how the characteristics of an individual and the influence of society contribute to the follower's perception of the leader and vice versa, but more research needs done on how the experienced historical behaviors, decisions, and cultures of the individual organization and any systems of authority under which that individual organization positions itself impact ILT. This literature review on ILT, coupled with the research question, led the researcher to ask the following interview question of the participants:

> IQ3: How did the preconceived ideas that you have of senior leaders increase or decrease the level at which you were willing to support and follow the incoming senior leader?

The Quality of the Working Relationship Between Managing Follower and Current Senior Leader and Potential Reasons for the Same

Determining the quality of the relationship between the managing follower and the current senior leader, as well as potentially discovering some of the causes and consequences of that relationship, is possible through the application of LMX. LMX measures the quality of the dyadic relationships that leaders develop with each follower "based on trust, respect, and obligation" (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). The individual relationship managing follower/senior leader relationship will need to be studied per research conducted by Graen and Cashman (1975), demonstrating that a

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leader develops different relationships of varying "depths of quality" with different followers (p. 47).

The study of relationship-forming and relationship-maintaining interactions that helps us measure the quality of the relationship between managing followers and the current senior leader is first recorded in research by Weber (1921-1922, 2002, p. XIII). Weber (2002) focused on "social associations" and "ideal-typical forms of socialization" (p. XIII). The study of leadership-related relationships grew to be more systematic as exemplified in the research of the "description and measurement" of "leader behavior" conducted by Stogdill and Coons (1957, abstract). LMX, first referred to as the "vertical dyad linkage model," is the most influential way to systematically analyze the "vertical dyad over time during role making activity" (Dansereau et al., 1975, p. 46). LMX focuses on the quality of the dyadic relationship that develops between leader and follower—a focus that continues to be a significant topic of interest, including in this study (Schyns & Day, 2010, p. 3). Understanding the quality of the relationship between managing followers and senior leaders may help explain why managing followers often are unwilling to follow the current senior leader.

Stepanek and Paul (2022) detailed research from Dienesch and Liden (1986) (pp. 624-626) and Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), which demonstrated the key "four dimensions" of "affect," "loyalty," "contribution," and "professional respect" used to measure LMX (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 43). Dienesch and Liden found that the level of "perceived contribution" holds the most sway (p. 625). When the managing follower perceives a lack of quality in these dimensions, it impacts how they function and feel about the quality of their relationship with the current senior leader, as these dimensions function as "currency" in the relationship (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 625).

Traditional leadership approaches stress the role of the leader in forming the LMX relationship; however, the managing follower's actions and attitude also influence the "quality" of "LMX relationships" (Dulebohn et al., 2012, p. 5; Engle & Lord, 1997, p. 988). Therefore, the focus of this study is rightly on managing followers. As senior leaders and managing followers depend on one another to move the organization toward its goals, they are compelled to "assess" and "evaluate" one another's intelligence and competence throughout their working relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2012, p. 5; Lord & Maher, 1991, p. 27). Due to the importance of the results of these "evaluations," what a dyadic partner believes the other partner "feels about them" also influences the quality of the LMX relationship (Snodgrass et al., 1998, p. 238).

LMX shows that followers will not usually come to a consensus about their experience of the leader because every relationship is different (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 227; Schyns & Day, 2010, p. 5). That is partly because every follower may be in a different stage of relationship development of LMX. The four stages were used for coding the

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data to better understand which stage of the relationship development each participant was in. The stages are described as role taking (where roles are assigned), role making (where roles are secured through trustworthy performance and followers earn being in the in-group), leadership making (those in the in-group receive development), and team making or the leadership network (the trust formed among the leadership team (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 239). LMX demonstrates that as relationships move through these stages, the most effective LMX begins with the transactional style of leadership and progresses to a more transformational approach (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 239).

A number of factors, such as the managing follower and the senior leader's first interaction (Dienesch & Liden, 1986, p. 626), the level of individualism and power distance (Dulebohn et al., 2012, p. 1), the managing follower judging the senior leader based on one attribute they connected to "preexisting beliefs about various personality types" (Cantor & Mischel, 1979, p. 187), and whether managing followers perceive themselves to have been placed in the senior leader's in-group or out-group (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 219) may be influencing the LMX. Given this literature, participants were asked the following question to explore why managing followers often resist the leadership of incoming senior leaders in environments of high turnover of senior leaders:

IQ4: How does your level of perceived contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect for the current senior leader increase or decrease your willingness to follow their leadership?

IQ5: How does what you believe the senior leader thinks about your level of perceived contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect either increase or decrease your willingness to follow their leadership?

Additional theories are used to explore why managing followers have difficulty following incoming senior leaders in settings with high senior leader turnover, as Erdogan and Bauer (2015) cautioned that LMX should not be used as the sole measure because current LMX research lacks objectivity and longevity (p. 413). LMX research has focused on the characteristics connected to the current leader and the current follower's exchanges and considerations regarding one another (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 227; Megheirkouni, 2017, p. 246; Schyns & Day, 2010, p. 5). There is a need for research that considers elements beyond that specific leader and follower and their relationship to the extenuating factors that influence that relationship, some of which may predate that follower and leader. Such elements include emotional well-being, mental health, emotional intelligence, previous positive and negative experiences of both the leader and the follower, the organizational history, practices, and culture experienced by both the leader and the follower. Drawing from

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the literature review on LMX and the research question, the following research questions were asked of the participants:

IQ6: How has the effect the senior leader has had on you increased or decreased your trust, respect, and obligation toward them?

IQ7: How have you perceived the effect you have on the senior leader to have increased or decreased their trust, respect, and obligation toward you?

Methods and Procedures

The Interview Questions

IQ1: How does the arrival of the current senior leader bring up feelings you may have about the last senior leader leaving in a way that either increases or decreases your willingness to follow their leadership?

IQ2: How were you given the opportunity to process your grief about the previous senior leader leaving in a way that either increased or decreased your willingness and ability to follow the incoming senior leader?

IQ3: How did the preconceived ideas that you have of senior leaders increase or decrease the level at which you were willing to support and follow the incoming senior leader?

IQ4: How does your level of perceived contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect for the current senior leader increase or decrease your willingness to follow their leadership?

IQ5: How does what you believe the senior leader thinks about your level of perceived contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect either increase or decrease your willingness to follow their leadership?

IQ6: How has the effect the senior leader has had on you increased or decreased your trust, respect, and obligation toward them?

IQ7: How have you perceived the effect you have on the senior leader to have increased or decreased their trust, respect, and obligation toward you?

Design

The methodologies of this study concentrate on a qualitative case study method and content analysis to best answer the research question through interview questions. The qualitative case study method allows the researcher to use interview questions to

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discover the intimate emotions and mindset of managing followers in organizations with high turnover of senior leadership to better understand why they often resist, work against, or wait out the incoming or current senior leader. Case study research allows the interview to be conducted in a setting that is most comfortable to the participant so that they can honestly provide their responses to the interview questions, sharing their lived experience as to if and to what degree their thoughts and emotional processing toward the incoming senior leader was impacted by unprocessed grief, preconceived prototypes of leaders that managing followers develop, or the quality of the working relationship between the managing follower and the current senior leader along with the potential reasons for the state of that working relationship.

Participants in this study were followers who currently or at some time had some managerial responsibility in an organization that experienced frequent turnover of the senior leader who acknowledge they had at some point resisted, worked against, or waited out the incoming senior leader rather than follow their leadership. The researcher looked for participants from four to six organizations of varying sizes that were known to have high senior leader turnover form a variety of ages and locations within the United States. The researcher posted a notice about the study on social media with their contact information, inviting those who met the criteria and wished to participate to email or text them. The researcher sent an email to those who responded to the invitation, which detailed that participants could respond with full details about the study, including a note that they could answer regarding an organization from their past or one they are currently connected to.

Six interviews were completed by participants ranging from 28 to 81 years old who responded to the interview questions in regards to their time employed in the following sectors and sizes: state government (medium-size facility), churches (small and medium locations within a large world-wide nonprofit organization), state government public schools (a medium school and a large school), manufacturing (small for-profit private), food service (small location within a large for-profit corporation), and federal government prison (large). All respondents were citizens of the United States from a variety of states. Respondents were 83.3% female and 16.7% male. Respondents were 50% aged 50 or below and 50% aged 51 or above.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semistructured interviews. Participants who responded positively to either a post listing the participant qualifications or a phone call inviting them to participate were sent an email that asked them to confirm they met the qualifications to be a participant, express their willingness to contribute to the research, and reply to schedule the interview time. The email included the content of the contract, including the purpose of the research, the time required of them should they

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participate, that they were free to exit the study at any time they wished, that they could request a review of the process or their role or treatment at any time during the study, that they would have the opportunity to give final approval to the transcripts of their interview, that they would be able to view the final work if they wished, that the name and unique identifying markers of the organization they answer questions about will not be divulged, and the interview questions to be asked of them in the Zoom interview. The participants' time investment was estimated to be 20 minutes (5 minutes to read and respond to the email, 10 minutes for the interview via Zoom, 3 minutes reviewing the transcript, and 2 minutes for the logistics of setting up the Zoom).

The interview questions were each derived from the literature. The data gathered from the interview questions were coded according to the area it related to for proper analysis, with key phrases noted to identify commonalities that were used to determine and adjust themes. When several participants from a variety of ages and organization types completed the interviews, the data reached data saturation given the insight gathered to discover why managing followers often resist the leadership of incoming senior leaders due to unprocessed grief, preconceived prototypes of leaders which managing followers develop, or the quality of the working relationship between the managing follower and the current senior leader along with the potential reasons for the state of that working relationship.

The interviews were conducted through Zoom. The audio from the Zoom video calls were recorded with all the information, including the purpose of the research and their rights as participants where each participants was asked to verbalize their approval for the interview to be recorded for research purposes. The transcribed interviews were emailed to participants to make amendments, if any, which were incorporated before analysis. All participants were interviewed via Zoom during nonwork hours. All participants were willing and understood the purpose of the study. Transcripts were scrubbed and uploaded to Intellectus Qualitative (2025) for analysis and recommendations regarding coding and themes.

Results

The themes below are derived from the coded transcripts and answer the research question, Why do manager followers in organizations with high turnover of senior leadership often resist, work against, or wait out the incoming or current senior leader?

Leadership Transition Expectations

The theme of leadership transition expectations helps answer the research question by illustrating how managers' previous experiences with leadership turnover create anticipatory frameworks that influence their current behavior. When organizations

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have high senior leadership turnover, managers develop expectations based on past transitions—often characterized by short tenures or failed change initiatives—leading them to view new leaders as temporary. These historically shaped expectations prompt resistance behaviors as a rational response: Why invest in relationships or changes that experience suggests will be short-lived? Rather than seeing resistance as mere obstinacy, this theme reveals it as a learned adaptive strategy based on organizational history and pattern recognition.

Table 1: Number of Excerpts by Code for Leadership Transition Expectations

Code	Excerpts
AI: Leadership Stability Expectations	2

Unaddressed Leadership Transition Grief

This theme helps answer the research question by revealing how emotional processing deficits contribute to resistance behaviors. When organizations fail to acknowledge the emotional impact of leadership transitions, manager followers experience unresolved grief that manifests as resistance. Without structured opportunities to process these feelings, they adopt coping mechanisms like waiting out new leadership or working against them as a displaced expression of their unaddressed emotional responses. This pattern suggests resistance behaviors may be symptomatic of institutional failure to support healthy emotional transitions rather than mere opposition to change.

Table 2: Number of Excerpts by Code for Unaddressed Leadership Transition Grief

Code	Excerpts
AI: Unsupported Grief Processing	3
AI: Lack of Grief Processing	1

Trust Dynamics in Leadership Relationships

This theme helps answer the research question by illuminating how the constant turnover of senior leadership disrupts the natural trust-building process that requires consistency and time to develop. When managers repeatedly experience leadership changes, they become hesitant to invest emotionally and professionally in new relationships that may prove temporary, leading to resistance behaviors. The cycle of building and losing trust with successive leaders creates a self-protective mechanism where waiting out becomes a rational response to avoid the vulnerability associated with trust that has been repeatedly broken. This pattern of deteriorating trust dynamics

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explains why manager followers develop resistance strategies rather than engage with new senior leaders.

Table 3: Number of Excerpts by Code for Trust Dynamics in Leadership Relationships

Code	Excerpts
AI: Breakdown of Trust	2
AI: Trust Develops Over Time	2
AI: Decreased Trust	3
AI: Distrust of Leadership	5

Defensive Adaptation Mechanisms

The theme of defensive adaptation mechanisms helps answer the research question by revealing how manager followers develop self-protective responses to cope with the instability caused by frequent leadership changes. When faced with recurring turnover at senior levels, these individuals create defensive routines—such as documenting interactions, bypassing authority, or maintaining low engagement—as rational adaptations to preserve their professional standing and psychological well-being. This pattern of behavior reflects not mere resistance but a strategic coping mechanism that emerges from the experience of repeatedly investing in relationships with leaders who subsequently depart, creating a self-protective cycle that manifests as waiting out the current leadership.

Table 4: Number of Excerpts by Code for Defensive Adaptation Mechanisms

Code	Excerpts
AI: Self-Protection Strategies	4

Sustained Psychological Damage From Poor Leadership

This theme illuminates how repeated exposure to poor leadership creates lasting psychological wounds that influence followers' resistance behaviors. Managers who have experienced multiple leadership transitions with inadequate leaders develop protective mechanisms like skepticism and disengagement that persist when new leaders arrive. These psychological effects—diminished trust, emotional exhaustion, and learned helplessness—directly contribute to their tendency to wait out or undermine new leadership, as they have internalized expectations of eventual

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leadership failure based on past trauma. The sustained nature of this damage explains why resistance persists even when new leadership may be competent.

Table 5: Number of Excerpts by Code for Sustained Psychological Damage From Poor Leadership

Code	Excerpts
AI: Long-Term Psychological Impact	1
AI: Declining Morale and Confidence	3

Leadership Style Dissonance

Leadership style dissonance addresses the research question by highlighting how resistance emerges when new senior leaders fail to align their approach with organizational expectations. When incoming leaders display disrespectful attitudes, openly criticize previous leadership, or implement abrupt changes without respecting established practices, managers develop active resistance strategies. This misalignment between expected leadership behaviors and actual practices creates legitimate gaps that prompt followers to wait out leaders they perceive as temporary or misguided, rather than investing in relationships they believe will ultimately fail due to this fundamental disconnect.

Table 6: Number of Excerpts by Code for Leadership Style Dissonance

Code	Excerpts
AI: Disrespectful Leadership Style	4
AI: Unmet Leadership Expectations	2

Fear-Based Compliance

This theme reveals that resistance to new senior leadership is rooted in a dysfunctional compliance mechanism where managers follow directives solely out of fear rather than genuine buy-in. When compliance is fear-based, managers are more likely to engage in minimum effort compliance or passive resistance, waiting out the leader until they inevitably depart. In organizations with high leadership turnover, this fear-based dynamic is particularly counterproductive as managers learn that superficial compliance while avoiding meaningful change is a safer strategy than authentic engagement with leaders who may not remain long enough to cement their initiatives.

Table 7: Number of Excerpts by Code for Fear-Based Compliance

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Code	Excerpts
AI: Fear-Based Compliance	5

Deteriorating Professional Trust

The theme of deteriorating professional trust helps answer why managers resist new senior leadership during high turnover periods, because it reveals how repeated leadership changes erode foundational professional relationships. As managers experience a succession of short-term leaders, each transition chips away at their willingness to invest emotionally and professionally in new directives. This cumulative breakdown of trust creates a self-protective stance where waiting out the current leader becomes a rational response to what experience has taught them will be another temporary relationship, making resistance a natural consequence of fractured professional trust rather than mere insubordination.

Table 8: Number of Excerpts by Code for Deteriorating Professional Trust

Code	Excerpts
AI: Deteriorating Professional Relationship	2

Diminished Professional Value

The theme of diminished professional value helps answer the research question because when managers consistently experience devaluation of their contributions and professional standing with each leadership change, they develop resistance mechanisms as a form of self-preservation. This theme reveals that manager followers who feel dismissed or disrespected by incoming senior leaders may intentionally disengage or resist directives as a way to maintain their sense of professional worth. Their decision to wait out transient leadership stems from previous experiences where their expertise was overlooked, creating a protective response to avoid repeated professional devaluation during high turnover cycles.

Table 9: Number of Excerpts by Code for Diminished Professional Value

Code	Excerpts
AI: Perceived Insignificance	1
AI: Perceived Lack of Respect	2

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Technological or Process Change-Induced Workplace Distress

The theme of technological or process change-induced workplace distress helps answer the research question by highlighting how technological or process change disruption creates an environment of perpetual job insecurity and toxic workplace dynamics that motivate middle managers to resist new leadership. When managers have previously experienced psychological harm from technological or process change implementations overseen by senior leaders, they may adopt defensive postures against incoming leadership who might introduce further technological or process changes. These managers may wait out new senior leaders, believing from past experience that technological or process change disruptions under changing leadership create vulnerability rather than opportunity, thus explaining their resistance as a self-preservation strategy in environments where leadership turnover coincides with technological or process transformation.

Table 10: Number of Excerpts by Code for Technological or Process Change-Induced Workplace Distress

Code	Excerpts
AI: Toxic Work Environment	1
AI: Job Insecurity	2

Institutional Void in Leadership Transition Support

The theme of institutional void in leadership transition support helps answer the research question by revealing how organizational failures to provide structured transition support creates conditions for resistance. When formal mechanisms for processing change and establishing new working relationships are absent, manager followers are left without guidance or emotional support during leadership transitions. This institutional void forces them to develop their own coping strategies, which often manifest as resistance or waiting out the new leader. The lack of clear direction and support during transitions essentially legitimizes passive resistance as employees default to informal, often self-protective behaviors in the absence of organizational scaffolding for adapting to new leadership.

Table 11: Number of Excerpts by Code for Institutional Void in Leadership Transition Support

Code	Excerpts
AI: Lack of Support and Guidance	3

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AI: Lack of Formal Transition Support	1
AI: Lack of Transition Process	1
AI: Absence of Transition Process	1

Followership Based on Authority Perception

This theme helps answer the research question by highlighting how manager followers assess and grant authority based on perception rather than position alone. In organizations with high leadership turnover, managers may resist new leaders because they have developed an assessment process that evaluates leadership competence and knowledge before granting followership. When faced with yet another leadership change, these managers are not automatically deferring to positional authority but rather waiting out the new leader until they have demonstrated sufficient competence to earn their followership—similar to how followership relationships with AI systems evolve based on demonstrated capabilities rather than assigned authority.

Table 12: Number of Excerpts by Code for Followership Based on Authority Perception

Code	Excerpts
AI: Conditional Initial Followership	1
AI: Leadership Competence Impacts Followership	3

Leadership Legitimacy and Professional Respect

The theme of leadership legitimacy and professional respect helps answer the research question by highlighting how managers resist leaders they do not professionally respect or view as legitimate. When experiencing high leadership turnover, managers evaluate each new senior leader's competence and communication style before committing their support. Without demonstrated expertise or ethical consistency, managers may withhold their engagement, choosing instead to wait out what they perceive as temporary or undeserving leadership. This resistance stems from a fundamental need for professional respect and legitimacy validation before authentic followership can be established in unstable leadership environments.

Table 13: Number of Excerpts by Code for Leadership Legitimacy and Professional Respect

Code	Excerpts
AI: Professional Recognition Matters	2

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AI: First Impressions and Communication Style	1
AI: Professional Respect	2
AI: Ethical Conflict	2

Leadership Disruption and Instability

The theme of leadership disruption and instability addresses the research question by revealing how frequent leadership turnover creates an environment where manager followers develop resistance as a coping mechanism. When organizations experience a revolving door of senior leaders, it prevents the formation of meaningful trust relationships between leaders and their teams, fostering a culture where waiting out the current leader becomes a rational response. This pattern of disruption creates organizational uncertainty that manager followers attempt to mitigate by maintaining the status quo rather than investing in potentially short-lived change initiatives, effectively explaining why they might resist or work against incoming leaders they perceive as merely temporary fixtures in an unstable leadership landscape.

Table 14: Number of Excerpts by Code for Leadership Disruption and Instability

Code	Excerpts
AI: Abrupt Leadership Transition	3
AI: Leadership Turnover	1
AI: High Leadership Turnover	5

Discussion

The research question explored why following managers often resist, work against, or wait out the incoming or current senior leader in environments with high senior leader turnover. The study demonstrated that following managers in environments with high senior leader turnover often resist, work against, or wait out the incoming or current senior leader due to leadership transition expectations, unaddressed leadership transition grief, trust dynamics in leadership relationships, as a defensive adaptation mechanism, sustained psychological damage from poor leadership, leadership style dissonance, fear-based compliance, deteriorating professional trust, deteriorating professional relationship, technological and process changes workplace distress, lack of reciprocal respect formation, an institutional void in leadership transition support, followership based on authority perception, questions about leadership legitimacy and professional respect, and leadership disruption and instability.

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Contribution to the Scholarly Literature

The findings of this study contribute to the scholarly literature by providing data that go beyond previous research, which noted the phenomenon in lack of performance and difficulty implementing important initiatives (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134) to provide data that explain why the phenomenon occurs. The findings also further scholarly literature by demonstrating the overlap and workplace application of Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model stages of grief, the ILT's prototype of leadership (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397), and the LMX dyadic working relationship (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). The findings of this study further the scholarly literature on LMX by going beyond the research studies of Erdogan and Bauer (2015), Megheirkouni (2017), Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), and Schyns and Day (2010) to consider the elements beyond a specific current leader, their follower, and their relationship to the extenuating factors that influence that relationship, some of which may predate that particular follower and leader.

Contribution to the Practitioner Literature

The findings of this study contribute to the practitioner literature by highlighting the reasons for a phenomenon that costs organizations a great deal of time, energy, and effectiveness while also pointing to the starting place for implementing corrective measures for the same. The results of this study not only identify multiple root causes that lead to the disruptive phenomenon, but show how they are each connected to a theory that informs as to corrective measures that the organizational leadership may implement.

Weaknesses of the Study

This study did not include any minority participants. The study participants were all natural citizens of the United States. Due to the demographics of the participants, the generalizability of the results of this study may be limited.

Recommended Future Research

Further research should be conducted on participants employed in high senior turnover environments in other cultures and other countries to determine if there is any variance in root causes based on culture. Further research should be conducted on minority participants employed in high senior turnover environments to determine if there is any variance in root causes based on that status. Further research should be conducted as to the effectiveness of measures that could be implemented that would address or treat the root causes for the phenomenon and how they could be implemented within each industry where high turnover of senior leadership has already been noted to be a

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common occurrence such as technology, non-profits, retail, healthcare, military, public education, and some industry (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134).

Conclusion

Followers with managerial responsibility, referred to as managing followers, often resist, work against, or wait out senior leaders in environments with frequent turnover of the senior leaders. This phenomenon has proven to result in diminished performance and difficulty in implementing important initiatives research as to the cause of this phenomenon is largely absent (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013). Research as to the cause of this phenomenon will impact sectors prone to high senior leader turnover many of whom are responsible for the well-being of society including technology, non-profits, retail, healthcare, military, public education, and some industry (Clinger, 2016, p. 1; Duffield et al., 2011, p. 503; Gartner & Gartner, 2025, p. 1; Lokke & Sorensen, 2021, p. 723; Mosadeghrad et al., 2013, p. 134).

Qualitative research was conducted on six participants from the United States who were interviewed via Zoom, providing data regarding their experiences in a wide range of private, public, and government sectors of all sizes. Root causes of this phenomenon were found to include fear-based compliance, lack of processes and communication around senior leader transitions, sustained psychological damage from poor leadership, leadership style dissonance, deteriorating professional trust, deteriorating professional relationship, technological and process changes workplace distress, lack of reciprocal respect formation, an institutional void in leadership transition support, followership based on authority perception, questions about leadership legitimacy and professional respect, and leadership disruption and instability.

The findings of this study provide data that demonstrate the root causes of this phenomenon to have strong connections to Kubler-Ross' (1969) change curve model stages of grief, the ILT's prototype of leadership (Schyns et al., 2011, p. 397), and the LMX dyadic working relationship (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015, p. 413). Further research is recommended to be conducted on participants in a variety of cultures and countries, as well as minority participants, and it could be expanded to test the effectiveness and implementation of measures developed in the future to correct the root causes of the phenomenon.

About the Author

April Briant is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University. She is an ordained elder in the Global Methodist Church, serving as Associate Minister at Commerce First Methodist Church in Commerce, Georgia. She

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also owns and operates a teaching nonprofit farm ministry called Mountain Fortress Miracle Farms, hosts a podcast called Unshakable, and instructs GED and ESL adult education at Lanier Technical College. In her pastorate, April Briant has been pastor in charge, Communications and Operations Pastor, and Executive Pastor. Prior to earning her M.Div., she was blessed to have successful careers in corporate meeting planning, executive assistance, litigation paralegal, and legal support. April is a proud mom to Hope (26) and Faith (20) and Mimi to Iris (3) and Malik (1). By God's grace, April is a strong transformational leader in the communities she serves, calling, equipping, and mobilizing others to be servant leaders in the community alongside her. During her pastorate, she designed a literary analysis approach for interactive Bible study, wrote multiple Bible studies, designed and co-led a 5-month annual workshop teaching laity how to speak the name of Jesus called the Go Beyond Academy, led many women's retreats, and wrote and facilitated Grief Recovery Workshops and Forgiveness and Emotional Intelligence Workshops. April's mailing address is 4165 Prather Bridge Road in Toccoa, GA 30577. She may be reached at apribr5@mail.regent.edu.

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Appendix: Excerpts List

Subject 5: My understanding of what the role of a senior leader should be increased my ability to follow the leadership of the new senior leader because I was able to not react to her whole attitude because I was there to do my job as the assistant manager which I cared about doing well. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The new senior leader's lack of experience quickly became a problem because they didn't have the answers that the other leader did. The previous senior leader left a lot up to us but if I had a question they could answer it. This new senior leader would answer questions with wrong information and when I ask again, they would tell me to figure it out myself. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

We didn't see the new senior leader every day - we were left on our own devices. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 3: My preconceived ideas about senior leaders increased the level at which I was willing and able to support and follow the new senior leader at least at first. I was trained that you should follow that person. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: They both thought I had valuable contributions which helped increase my ability to follow them just a little bit. I think that they thought I was loyal because I stayed with them. I was more influenced by their loyalty to me. I did what I was going to do, what I wanted to do, and what I knew was the right thing to do for the job. One senior leader told me several times that they thought I had a good impact on things, and they promoted me, so I think that did help me to follow them better. The first senior leader had no impact. The second senior leader, it did help me follow her to a degree. I think she I thought I had a good reputation in court, and a good reputation within the agency, and I would equate that with professionalism and how I handled myself. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: A way was provided to process the grief of one senior leader leaving and a new senior leader starting via employee services, but it was not a safe way so it therefore it went unused which ultimately decreased my ability to follow the new senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I was paranoid in the high turnover environment. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The senior leader's contributions, loyalty, and professional respect were all put towards advancing their own career. Senior leaders avoided putting things they were telling us

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to do in writing so they couldn't be held accountable later. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 2's iPhone: There was very little warning about the past 2 leaders leaving; we were not prepared even after they left there was very little explanation about why they left and because of that (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 2's iPhone: I perceive the affect I had on the new senior manager increased their trust, respect, and obligation towards me. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I believe the goal is they wanted you to be in fear of your job being in jeopardy; they could make your life harder with bad comments on your annual reviews if you didn't word your reports just right. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I did have one new senior leader that was quite responsive and positive with me and cared about the clients. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: There was no official way. I just did it with my colleagues, and my peers talked about it with them just to commiserate. There was no official way from the Administration to do that. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I think I am fine in the establishment, that my job is safe – but it never really is. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

That created a problem because I had to tell the people looking at me for the answer that we had to figure it out, which wasn't what they wanted to hear. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

With the previous senior leader, I would get the correct answer. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 4: I expected the senior leader to be somebody I could go to, somebody to back us up, and somebody we had confidence in. And I wanted more of that from the new senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I have to be respectful in front of people as far as my personal respect for him, but I didn't feel like he respected me or anybody else, or the company which decreased my willingness to follow him. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I felt like I was betraying my previous senior leader because I stayed working with the new senior leader, but I was glad I did as it helped me get a manager job at another location. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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Subject 4: We really didn't have a way to process it. There was no human resource department. There was just the owner. I always feel you should follow your leader; no matter what as they are your superior. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

With the second senior leader, her loyalty was probably questionable, but her knowledge and understanding of the work was there, so that was enough respect from me to follow that person for a while. Over time both had a terrible affect on the agency, and then my desire to follow them decreased. My perception of their professional respect for others decreased my willingness to follow them. But that wasn't obvious at the very beginning. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 4: At first, I thought the new senior leader would be better than the one leaving because they had better skills - they could run more equipment, were younger, and able to do the job more. I was really excited about the new senior leader to start with. It didn't take long to find out that younger people wasn't necessarily better because they didn't have the experience that the previous senior leader did. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

He really wasn't a good leader, because part of the game for him to be a leader of all of us who are working for him, he was supposed to please the one above him. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I just ripped everything out of the basement without help and I had 5 inch nails in the wall. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

One senior leader told me several times that they thought I had a good impact on things, and they promoted me, so I think that did help me to follow them better. The first senior leader had no impact. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 5: The affect that the new senior leader had on me decreased the trust, respect, and obligation I felt towards them. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Senior leaders avoided putting things they were telling us to do in writing so they couldn’t be held accountable later. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: I'm thinking of 2 specific transitions. One was from a very steady, long term leader to just a very flaky person who ended up not even being there that long. And then the other transition I'm thinking of is the last one which was after a series of senior leader turnovers. This person that was in place was very difficult. And then this new person I had no idea, but they ended up being a lot more stable but in both of those transitions I had no idea what was going to happen. I had frustrations with the one per

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this last transition and all I hoped was that that person wasn't as bad as person who left. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Both senior leaders trusted me as a person and respected me, and I think it increased their trust in me. When I told her the second one, I was leaving, she cried, which surprised me as she was very unemotional. I perceived she respected me, and I think that increased over time, even when I got my new job at the place where she used to work, she called that boss and told them really good things about me which was huge because credibility in that arena was really important and that gave me instant credibility. The affect I had on the first senior leader was to intimidate her because I knew the job better than her which decreased her obligation toward me. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The rules are very strict there about not talking about anything private or personal. Somebody wrote a letter to the editor once and the department got a hold of that and the young man suddenly no longer worked in the office. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I perceived senior leaders didn't have any loyalty to us employees in most cases as we had to be able to protect ourselves in case something went wrong. Their loyalty was to the higher ups. I had very little respect for any of them. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

With one senior leader it got to the place where he would say no to something, and I would just send a note to the judge (an outside authority over him) who would say yes in a month. I had to be defiant in doing things if I was trying to do something for somebody and the senior leader always would say, “No, you can't do that.” I went just around the new senior leader because I know it needed to be done. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I am glad I got out of the toxic system that was this work environment. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: They both thought I had valuable contributions which helped increase my ability to follow them just a little bit. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: I perceived the new senior leader’s contribution, their loyalty, their affect, and their professional respect to be for their own career and their own bosses which decreased my ability to fully follow them as a leader though I had to follow them to a certain extent to keep my job through compliance with the rules and regulations about my behavior. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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I think sometimes they thought my loyalty had to be limited because I do believe they viewed me as insufficient person to be there to do the job because I am a woman. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I serve churches and in this particular church that I was serving on this particular time we had a turnover of 2 senior leaders, one left in the middle of the year and the next one that served left within about 6 months because he had aging parents that he needed to care for then we were going to get the third one in a very short time. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I kept going because I needed my job, but it did get to a point where it was just too much. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The previous senior leader stayed there day and night sometimes and they just fired her and gave her no explanation and brought that new senior leader in with the terrible attitude which caused me to lose a lot of respect for that for the district manager who above the new senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Her contribution was to get rid of all the old workers and bring in new workers and to do everything the way she had done it at a previous store which decreased my willingness to follow her. It seemed like she loved her title because she could tell everybody else what to do, and she was coming to a new store that she didn't know nothing or nobody there. She didn't know our customers like we did. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

It wasn't long before he started firing the staff. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: The preconceived ideas I had about senior leaders were that they mostly were not to be trusted and were looking out only for themselves which decreased my ability to follow the leadership of the new senior leader significantly. I had some previous senior leaders that were really good but normally they were just in it for themselves to step up their career and didn't care who they stepped on, or who they burnt to dust. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 2's iPhone: The preconceived ideas I had of senior leaders before the new senior leader got there decreased my ability to trust or to follow the new senior leader because I believed a person in that leadership position should lead and believe and demonstrate perseverance, more steadfastness, more engagement with the people so, I was very disappointed when none of those preconceived expectations were met which made it more difficult to follow the new senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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Subject 2's iPhone: My perception of their contribution, their loyalty, their affect, and their professional respect decreased my willingness to follow their leadership. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: It is not feelings about the old person as much as it is how the new person presents themselves such as how much they want to change, or if they bad mouth the old person, then I have felt like I need to be defensive and sort of protective of the old person. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 1: The first one totally decreased. I wasn't following that person anywhere. The new senior leader had no loyalty and didn't know what they were doing so I'm not following that person. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

There are a few things that shine through that weren't like on the loyalty spectrum that did get the affect both senior leaders had on me to decrease my trust toward them. The affect the first senior leader had on me decreased my respect toward her. I still have respect for the second senior leader so for that senior leader the affect they had on me maintained or increased my respect toward them. The affects that the first senior leader had on me decreased my sense of obligation toward them however, I still did my job because I had loyalty and obligation to the work but not to that senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 3: My perception of the new senior leader's contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect decreased my willingness to follow them as a leader. I think that they did not respect me as the person and the job that I held. They were very loyal to their job and did what they thought was best, even if it meant hurting others along the way. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

When the new senior leader came, I was hopeful, and I had asked my people to trust this person. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

It was a shock. I think I am fine in the establishment, that my job is safe – but it never really is. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

But I just kept working. I kept doing my job, and I got out there as soon as I could. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

He dismissed my contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect as unimportant often threatening myself and other staff by saying things like, "If you can't do it, I'll find somebody that can." He acted like a dictator more than anything. Everything he said had the tone of belittling me and the staff. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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And there were a lot of people who got burnt in the dust by senior leaders, so you had to keep all your information and everything you did. I had boxes at home in case there was any question about anything I did. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I did what I had to do to meet all the criteria of the policies, but it didn't go beyond that as I didn't respect hardly any of them. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 4: The affect the new senior leader had on me decreased my trust, my respect, and my obligation toward him. I couldn't trust him as he would say one thing and do another. He would take credit for our work that went well and no credit for anything that didn't go well. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The affect he had was to cause me to feel tension like I was walking a tightrope or walking on eggshells because I wanted to say one thing but couldn't because I can't respect myself after I say certain things. The main thing is trust; if I can't trust somebody I work for or work with pretty much everything else goes by the wayside. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 3: The affect that the new senior leader had on me significantly decreased my trust, respect, and obligation towards them. The way conversations went with them time and time again still affect how I deal with senior managers, coworkers, and people I manage today. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 2's iPhone: The affect that the new senior leader had on me decreased my trust, my respect, and my obligation toward the new senior leader. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 2's iPhone: The affect that senior leader had on me neither increased or decreased my feelings of obligation towards the new senior leader. I had certain obligations to that senior leader to produce for them paperwork and reports, and provide leadership and I took seriously my obligations. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 5: She did not consider the affect I was having there. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The staff couldn't take somebody telling them to do this and that while the senior leader does nothing to help them succeed. What I perceived of his professional respect definitely decreased my willingness to follow his leadership. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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We had a lot of temporary senior leaders who are generally very difficult to please because a lot of times we didn't have interactions with them face to face and they each wanted reporting done a different way. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: I perceived the affect that I had on the new senior leader to be non-existent and therefore to have decreased his trust, respect, and obligation towards me. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 3: We did have reviews, and my perception of how the new senior leader viewed my contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect made me decrease my willingness to follow them. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 5: There was no opportunity to process grief about the previous senior leader leaving which decreased my ability to follow the leadership of the new senior leader and gave me major trust issues with the owners and higher management of the organization. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: The affect that the senior leader had on me is to let me know they cannot be trusted and they do not value me, so it has decreased my trust, my respect, and my obligation toward them. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 3: The affect I had on the new senior leader decreased their trust, respect, and obligation towards me. I don't think they think about me for a second now. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

That didn't come to fruition exactly so but the transition from the really stable person. There weren't really expectations except maybe, that it would be as good as that person, because that person really had a good handle on things and gave everybody a voice and so I guess didn't realize how good I had it with that person. I don't know what I expected. I guess I expected the same, but I was very disappointed in that transition. Their planning was pretty different. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 1 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 5: I had this experience where the previous senior leader got fired - she walked in that morning, and they just told her turn in her keys and then they brought the new senior leader in at the same time. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

It drained my emotions and my confidence. It killed my confidence. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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The affect the new senior leader had definitely decreased my willingness to follow his leadership and the same with much of the staff. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 4 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

Subject 6: The arrival of the new senior leader brought up concerns about how they wanted things done compared to the last senior leader which increased my willingness to follow their leadership because I needed to keep my job and get good reviews to survive. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

There was one senior leader who was trying to do the right thing and that increased my trust, respect, and obligation toward him, but he wasn't there long. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 6 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I think that they did not respect me as the person and the job that I held. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 3 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

I think they appreciated my leadership. I think they respected me as a professional comrade, or co-worker, and since I was under their leadership. I did have reviews with the senior leaders, and they made good comments about me, so I think they respected me, my role, and my accomplishments. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 2 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

The new senior leader just kept on bossing everybody around comparing the way she wanted things done to the wrong way the previous senior leader had done things. I was the assistant manager at the time and the way upper management brought in the new senior leader and fired the previous senior leader without considering anyone else's feelings made it very hard for me to follow the new senior leader's leadership. (25SU LPHD757 Subject 5 Transcript Scrubbed.docx)

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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The Impact of Organizational Spirituality on Employee Well-Being and Organizational Performance in Multicultural Workplaces

Jeffrey McKinney
Regent University
Roundtable: Organizational Leadership

Abstract

This research employs a unique qualitative strategy, utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the influence of spiritual leadership on organizational well-being and employee experiences. By using in vivo coding, the study captures participants' authentic voices, offering detailed, firsthand accounts of how spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation through genuine interpersonal interactions (RQ1/IQ1). The findings indicate that leaders' empathy and kindness, as demonstrated through effective communication, significantly enhance employee well-being and positively contribute to the organization's overall health (RQ2/IQ2). The study highlights that spiritual leaders' focus on listening to God's Word, along with their respect and empathy for followers, creates a supportive environment that links individual well-being with organizational success (RQ3/IQ3). This research offers unique insights into the connection between spiritual values and leadership practices, demonstrating that spiritual leadership fosters emotional bonds and enhances organizational performance. The results emphasize the importance of developing leadership programs that prioritize emotional intelligence, active listening, and spiritual inclusivity. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of spiritual leadership across diverse cultural contexts, with a focus on its adaptability to global workplace challenges and its role in promoting cross-cultural collaboration. The findings underscore the significant impact of spiritual leadership within modern organizational structures.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, empathy and kindness, interpersonal communication, spiritual leadership, organizational well-being

Karakas (2010) asserts the potential impact of integrating religious beliefs in organizations on productivity or profitability is a complex and controversial issue. Benefiel et al. (2014) note that some companies adopt a value-free approach by suppressing all forms of religious or spiritual expression. Hicks (2003) points out that a strict secularist stance, which prohibits any display of religion or spirituality in the

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workplace, also imposes a values-laden perspective on its employees. Despite extensive research in these areas, gaps remain in understanding the cumulative impact of these factors on job satisfaction, particularly within a large-scale framework encompassing multiple sectors (Jo & Shin, 2025). Conversely, many scholars argue that spirituality can significantly enhance organizational performance (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Fry, 2005). This study provides preliminary evidence that integrating spiritual practices into the workplace can promote diversity and inclusivity, foster greater employee commitment, and help reduce stress and burnout, offering an optimistic outlook for the future.

Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2015) explored the implications of fostering a sense of spirituality within an organization, especially its impact on employee well-being across different cultural backgrounds and its influence on overall organizational performance. Their analysis emphasized the importance of inclusive spiritual practices, the challenges of integrating spirituality in a multicultural environment, and the potential benefits for both employees and the organization. Karakas (2010) proposes that cultivating and expressing the spirit at work could help address stress and burnout while promoting positive outcomes for employee well-being. Burack (1999) contends that many employers are encouraging workplace spirituality to enhance staff satisfaction, dedication, and effectiveness. Villani et al. (2019) observed that spirituality and religiosity are connected to positive subjective well-being. Lee et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of research on multicultural work groups to evaluate existing literature on cultural diversity within teams. Their study aimed to reconcile differing perspectives and previous findings while clarifying the mechanisms and contextual factors that influence how diversity impacts team outcomes. Lee et al. assert that cultural diversity does not directly affect team performance; instead, process factors such as creativity and cohesion mediate its effects.

Recent studies (Haly-Ministries, 2020; Laker, 2025; Miner, 2017) emphasize the vital role of spiritual leadership in fostering creativity, trust, and motivation through authentic interpersonal communication. Research shows that spiritual leaders who practice genuine communication can strengthen team unity and encourage innovation (Miner, 2017). The importance of empathy and kindness in leadership is highlighted, as these qualities are essential for employee well-being, stress reduction, and job satisfaction, ultimately improving organizational health (Laker, 2025). Spiritual leaders who focus on listening to God's Word and empathizing with their followers create a supportive environment that promotes individual and organizational well-being (Haly Ministries, 2020). These leaders cultivate a sense of purpose and belonging, which boosts employee engagement and overall organizational effectiveness while providing reassurance and confidence in their leadership.

It is essential to deepen our understanding of organizational spirituality, empowerment, diversity, empathy, motivation, and how leaders can foster a positive

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work environment, boost morale, and enhance overall productivity. In this context, spiritual leadership plays a crucial role. The current study logically builds on Phase 2 of the research, using the data gathered in Phase 1. The aims are achieved by thoroughly examining various principles, literature, concepts, and theories to address the research questions (RQs) fully. This focus on spiritual leadership provides reassurance and confidence in its ability to improve employee well-being, encouraging further exploration and application.

> (RQ1): How do you experience and make meaning of spiritual leadership practices—specifically when leaders seek to hear God's Word while attentively empathizing with and respecting you—and how do those experiences relate to your personal well-being and your perceptions of organizational health?
>
> (RQ2): How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?
>
> (RQ3): How do you experience and interpret the spiritual leadership of those who demonstrate personal growth while fostering the development of others in diverse communities, and how does their practice of delegation and empowerment shape your sense of belonging, purpose, and organizational well-being?

Principles

As previously mentioned, the current research systematically builds on Phase 2, using data collected in Phase 1. Winston (2023) points out that Caulton (2022) and Puppo (2022) share similar principles, including the importance of focusing on hearing God, empathy and respect, compassion, active listening, sharing knowledge, development, and empowerment. These principles are especially relevant for understanding how spiritual leadership impacts employee empowerment and creativity. Henson (2022) states that biblical organizational spirituality centers on Jesus Christ as the source of life and purpose. He explains that a literature review on organizational spirituality and workplace faith has identified specific themes aligned with the three levels of organizational spirituality. According to Henson (2022),

> (A) Intrapersonal aspects include spiritual identity, biblical values, Godly purpose, meaningful work, dependence, faith, integrity, spiritual formation, and personal development. (B) Interpersonal dynamics involve a range of values such as service, sacrifice, stewardship, generosity, empathy, compassion, inclusion, diversity, justice, trust, mutual respect, love, teamwork, communication, and empowerment. (C) Organizational elements comprise

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> values, a collective mission, shared vision, common purpose, social responsibility, community engagement, and a collective commitment (p. 4).

Principle 1: Spiritual Leaders Focus on Hearing the Word of God as They Pay Attention, Have Empathy for, and Show Respect to Their Followers (Puppo, 2022)

This principle emphasizes the importance of spiritual leaders being attentive to their followers, demonstrating empathy and respect, and focusing on the teachings of the Word of God. Evidence suggests that spiritual leaders should prioritize listening to the Word of God, paying close attention to their followers, and showing empathy and respect toward them. Fee (1995) supports the pastoral duty of leaders to engage deeply with Scripture, not only for personal growth but also to guide their communities with honesty and integrity. He highlights Paul's directive to "rightly divide the word of truth" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, 2 Tim 2:15), reinforcing the importance of careful study and precise teaching of God's Word. Fee connects this to the broader pastoral responsibility of fostering a community built on mutual respect, empathy, and attentiveness, which aligns with the principles outlined by Puppo (2022). Paul's instructions serve as the foundational element of RQ1 and significantly influence interview question one (IQ):

> RQ1/IQ1: How do you experience the leadership of those who focus on hearing God's Word while paying attention, empathizing with, and respecting you, and how do those experiences influence your sense of personal well-being and your perception of the organization's overall health

Henry (1996a) asserts that effective spiritual leadership requires a deep engagement with and understanding of the Word of God, which allows leaders to provide meaningful guidance to their followers. Effective listening is a key part of successful leadership. Active listening involves an open mind, welcoming the opportunity to hear different ideas, accept various perspectives, and consider new possibilities (Center for Creative Leadership, 2019).

Additionally, Psalm 1:2 describes the blessed person as someone who "meditates on God's Law Day and night," highlighting the importance of continuous engagement with God's Word (Henry, 1996a). This implies that spiritual leaders should deeply engage with Scripture and consistently reflect on its teachings. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 4:2, Henry explores the Apostle Paul's emphasis on transparency and integrity in ministry. Paul condemns secretive or deceptive practices and instead advocates for honest proclamation of truth. Henry emphasizes that true ministry is rooted in honestly and clearly presenting the Gospel, engaging each person's conscience before God. Alongside Henry's insights, Fee (1995) further discusses the pastoral

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implications of 2 Timothy 2:15, asserting that spiritual leaders must be thoroughly involved with Scripture, ensuring accurate interpretation and application. Fee notes this diligent approach strengthens the leader's spiritual foundation and fosters a culture of respect and empathy within the congregation. This perspective suggests that spiritual leaders should focus on faithfully following God's Word while caring for and respecting their followers. Collectively, these passages show that spiritual leaders should prioritize listening to God's Word, being attentive to those they lead, and demonstrating empathy and respect through their leadership.

Principle 2: Effective Spiritual Leaders Facilitate Interpersonal Communication Among Followers (Caulton, 2022)

Several scholars in organizational behavior (Bakar et al., 2010; Jachowicz, 2016) recognize the critical mediating role of interpersonal communication satisfaction in their studies of the relationships between different leadership practices and various employee outcomes. The observations by Bakar et al. and Jachowicz highlight a connection to the second interview question, especially regarding leadership practices and the resulting effects at the employee level. Their comments significantly influence RQ2/IQ2:

> RQ2/IQ2: How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?

Earlier studies (Thanacoody et al., 2009) show that open and regular communication among supervisors and colleagues, as well as satisfaction from effective conversations with management, can improve clarity about roles and expectations. This, in turn, helps reduce emotional exhaustion and lowers the risk of job burnout among employees. Concerning Ephesians 4:15–16, Henry (1996b) emphasizes the importance of speaking truth with love and the need for spiritual growth in Christ. The discussion focuses on the necessity for believers to share truth with love and foster unity within Christ's body. Henry's insights on spiritual growth and maturity are enlightening, demonstrating how each member contributes to the church's development, with Christ as its head. This passage highlights the importance of truth and love in fostering spiritual harmony and growth within the Christian community. In his commentary, Henry interprets James 1:19 as a call for moral restraint, urging believers to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001). This verse is seen as an invitation for believers to stay attentive and receptive to God's word, emphasizing patience and self-control in communication and reaction. Henry stresses that this behavior reflects insight and mature faith, leading to a more just and balanced life. These qualities are essential for living in harmony with divine principles, showing that anger often hinders spiritual progress.

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Proverbs 27:17 highlights the transformative power of relationships in fostering growth and understanding. Henry (1996a) argues that people improve one another through meaningful contact and mutual accountability, similar to iron sharpening iron. This idea aligns with the broader biblical theme of community, where interactions support spiritual and personal development (Creswell, 2013). The proverb indicates that positive interactions boost individual effectiveness and enhance communal well-being. Engaging in such relationships requires humility, openness to feedback, and a commitment to mutual growth, reflecting the scriptural call to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Heb 10:24).

Principle 3: Effective Spiritual Leaders Invest in the Diversity of Their Teams Through Delegation and Empowerment (Caulton, 2022)

El Boghdady (2025) asserts that embracing equality, diversity, and inclusion goes beyond ethical considerations; it is essential for advancing knowledge and solving global problems. Chengere and Bekele's (2024) research consolidates findings on leadership across different cultural settings, emphasizing the importance of cultural intelligence, inclusive leadership, and effective diversity management in improving organizational performance. The review critically examines the ethical and moral aspects of leadership, cross-cultural leadership frameworks, and the impact of diversity on organizational effectiveness. Additionally, it offers practical solutions to challenges in cross-cultural leadership, such as communication barriers and conflict resolution. Their work proposes strategies to develop cultural competence and create inclusive environments with clear implications for organizational practice. Chengere and Bekele's findings provide key insights for leaders, organizations, and policymakers to leverage diversity as a strategic asset for innovation and growth. Their review highlights the specific challenges of cross-cultural leadership and stresses the importance of adaptive leadership styles, community engagement, and capacity building in achieving organizational success. The issues discussed include communication obstacles, cultural expectations, dispute resolution, community involvement, and capacity development. Their findings underscore the importance of adaptive leadership, cultural intelligence, and continuous learning in overcoming these challenges and driving corporate success. Leaders skilled at managing these difficulties are more likely to foster innovation and growth worldwide (Chengere & Bekele, 2024). Chengere and Bekele's contributions regarding equality, diversity, and inclusion are significant in relation to RQ3/IQ3.

> RQ3/IQ3: How do you experience spiritual leaders who actively pursue personal growth while supporting the development of others in diverse communities, and how does their approach to delegation and empowerment influence your sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being within the organization?

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When employees are encouraged to show engagement, they demonstrate increased commitment, motivation, and dedication to their professional roles. Al-Haj (2007) suggests that empowerment, by its very nature, aims to help those who are disadvantaged, facilitating a shift from a state of powerlessness to one of power, at both individual and collective levels. Several passages in the Bible demonstrate that effective spiritual leaders should foster team diversity through delegation and empowerment. For example, in Exodus 18:21–22, Moses assigns leadership duties to capable men, and in Acts 6:2–4, the apostles empower others to handle practical tasks, allowing them to focus on their ministry. Henry (1996a) highlights Jethro's advice to Moses as a fundamental principle in leadership, emphasizing the strategic delegation of responsibilities to capable individuals for better governance. In Exodus 18:17–23, Jethro notes Moses's extensive efforts in leading the people and recommends designating competent individuals to ease his leadership burdens. Henry underlines the wisdom of Jethro's counsel, emphasizing the importance of practical administration and the advantages of collective accountability in leadership.

The passage emphasizes the importance of teamwork and efficient organization in achieving effective leadership and preventing burnout. This supports the need for delegation and empowering others to assume leadership roles. According to Winston (2023), delegating enables leaders to free up time and allows followers to participate in productive information exchange. By implementing this strategy, leaders will discover that delegation fosters confidence within the team and enables them to concentrate their efforts on other priorities. Empowerment is achieved through trust and the exchange of information (Winston, 2023).

Henry (1996b) views Acts 6:1–7 as a crucial moment in early church leadership, emphasizing the appointment of seven deacons to address the concerns of Hellenistic Jews about fair food distribution, thus maintaining community harmony and apostolic focus. This verse shows the early church's commitment to fairness and the need for capable leadership. Henry highlights the wisdom of the apostles in assigning duties to meet both spiritual and practical needs. The event underscores the value of service, solidarity, and empowering capable individuals to support the growing church. Henry further explains 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, using the metaphor of the body of Christ to depict the profound unity and purposeful diversity within the church, emphasizing each member's unique yet vital role in fostering spiritual maturity. He demonstrates that each church member, like a body part, has a different purpose that contributes to the overall health and effectiveness of the whole. He stresses the importance of mutual care, relationships, and recognizing that all members, regardless of their roles, are essential for the body's optimal functioning. His discussion highlights the significance of unity in diversity, promoting a harmonious and collaborative community in Christ.

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These biblical passages collectively underscore the responsibility of spiritual leaders to cultivate team diversity through thoughtful delegation and the affirmation of individual gifts. Such theological principles resonate with emerging scholarship on organizational spirituality. Henson (2022) argues that, despite a robust body of literature and conceptual ambiguity in organizational contexts, spirituality extends beyond personal experience and relational dynamics, permeating the organization's ethos itself. Similarly, Crossman (2016) emphasizes the necessity of harmony between individuals and their organizational environments, suggesting that spirituality fortifies the bond among individuals, their sense of purpose, and the broader community.

Literature Review

Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) highlight that the mechanisms linking engaging leadership to work engagement are a vital research area. They emphasize that effective leadership stems from identifying specific behaviors that foster positive outcomes by addressing individuals' needs. Hoek et al. (2021) emphasize the significant impact of leadership strategies and techniques on employee motivation and productivity, underscoring their critical role in achieving organizational success. Religious beliefs are key motivators that influence individuals' behaviors and attitudes in pursuit of personal and communal goals (Villani et al., 2019). Effective communication is crucial in religious contexts to improve mutual understanding and build community among participants (Croucher et al., 2017). These insights are essential for understanding how spiritual leaders can foster creativity, trust, and motivation among their followers.

Dimovski (2023) highlights that effective communication about religious diversity promotes mutual respect and understanding among employees. Building on this, Kwantes (2024) suggests that incorporating religious perspectives into organizational culture not only boosts workplace inclusivity but also increases employee engagement by recognizing and valuing different belief systems. Jo and Shin (2025) show that organizational culture significantly influences employees' attitudes and results, notably impacting their job satisfaction and overall engagement. Hoek et al. (2021) stress that factors like recognition, fairness, and participation are essential for fostering a positive work environment. According to Marques et al. (2009), the primary role of a leader is to provide ethical leadership. Marques et al. emphasize that spiritual principles and practices help leaders demonstrate ethical leadership, thereby supporting the spiritual growth of both individuals and organizations.

Henson's (2022) contributors (Buszka & Ewest, 2020; Crossman, 2016; Fry, 2003; Konz & Ryan, 1999) use grammatical-historical criticism and socio-rhetorical analysis approaches. Henson's research examines the concepts of biblical justice and shalom in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10. It evaluates Jesus's actions in John 11 as a model for leadership during crises. The literature investigates leadership

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insights through an analysis of John's account of the Last Supper in John 13. It also explores John 15, emphasizing the impact of spiritual formation on personal behaviors and relationships. The authors analyze how spirituality influences organizational change management in John 20 and consider its role in fostering unity, empowerment, and service, as exemplified in Acts 4. Henson's research, alongside contributions from various scholars, offers a comprehensive framework for examining how biblical principles and spiritual formation can enhance organizational spirituality and love. Ultimately, this promotes a more compassionate, resilient, and cohesive organizational environment. The findings by Croucher et al. (2017) and Villani et al. (2019) have significant implications for RQ1/IQ1.

RQ1/IQ1 explores how spiritual leadership influences organizational dynamics. Caulton (2022) examines the ways in which spiritual leaders foster creativity and trust within teams, highlighting these traits as essential drivers of innovation. Complementing this, Puppo (2022) emphasizes how spiritually grounded leadership promotes motivation, ultimately improving team cohesion and collective performance. The importance of authentic interpersonal communication is also emphasized, underscoring the value of genuine and empathetic interactions in leadership. Fry et al. (2017) show that spiritual leadership significantly enhances employees' sense of purpose and belonging at work. Their results indicate that a stronger connection to organizational values and mission increases commitment and boosts productivity. By focusing on intrinsic motivation and meaningful engagement, spiritual leadership helps create a workplace culture where employees are more aligned with shared goals and more willing to contribute to long-term success. Gotsis and Grimani (2017) highlight that integrating spiritual values within leadership frameworks encourages greater inclusivity by fostering respect for diverse beliefs, worldviews, and personal meaning-making. Their research suggests that such integration promotes psychological safety and emotional well-being, both individually and collectively, by aligning workplace culture with values of compassion, integrity, and shared purpose. This alignment cultivates environments where employees feel genuinely seen and supported, improving collaboration and overall organizational health.

Organizational Spirituality and Love

Building on the solid foundation of the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, Angeles (2024) explores different expressions of biblical love. She examines their relevance in modern workplaces, especially in nurturing leader-follower relationships and influencing organizational performance. Angeles suggests that, by drawing inspiration from the Word of God and viewing Jesus as a model of leadership rooted in love for His followers, several key concepts emerge that represent the biblical qualities of love: kindness, patience, happiness, diligence, equality, self-acceptance, and optimism. Angeles argues that various ways a leader shows affection can significantly boost

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employee performance, fostering stronger leadership and organizational effectiveness. Marques et al. (2009) state that ethical leaders act as moral individuals, demonstrating ethical behavior and caring for their followers. Marques et al. also argue that personal experience teaches most people that fear is love's spiritual, emotional, and psychological opposite.

According to Marques et al. (2009), no one is motivated by fear. Marques et al. emphasize that the opposite is true: Fear motivates people but does not inspire them. Love is the consistent source of most human inspiration. Bocarnea et al. (2024) state that different types of love exist. For example, *agape* (¢γ´απη) love is described as an unconditional and sacrificial love that exists between God and humanity (John 3:16) or between God the Father and God the Son (John 3:35, 15:9, 17:23–24). Bocarnea et al. highlight that the expressions of self-sacrificing agape love are shown in John 13:34 and 15:12–13. Based on a Greek translation, Bocarnea et al. clarify that agape is a form of selfless love characterized by its unconditional and limitless nature. The ancient philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) emphasized that balance in relationships emerges through intentional expressions of love, suggesting that individuals often love others for specific reasons. This concept is further explored and interpreted in the 2011 edition of *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, ca. 250 B.C.E./2011).

Hees (2024) argues that joy arises from moments that acknowledge the spiritual significance of events and individuals depicted in Scripture. This view affirms that every person has inherent worth, rooted in the divine image given by the Creator. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ demonstrates the profound depth of divine love, revealing the innate value of humanity within God's redemptive plan for salvation, as further examined in Hees's earlier theological reflections from 2004. Through this act of sacrificial grace, believers see not only redemption but also the extraordinary compassion that underlies the Christian story. Despite this central theme, the two greatest commandments—loving God with all your heart and loving others as yourself—are increasingly pushed aside in modern discussions.

Hees (2024) emphasizes how these essential teachings, crucial to Christian ethics and spiritual growth, are often overlooked amid modern distractions and ideological divisions. Consequently, Jesus and the apostles frequently urged their followers to cultivate love for one another, stressing the rejection of self-love and the importance of humility and selflessness. Compassionate leaders recognize the intrinsic value of their followers as unique individuals (Hees, 2024). Hamilton and Winston (2022) highlights the importance of love within the context of organizational spirituality.

The discussion focuses on the vital role of love, respect, compassion, and teamwork in cultivating a spiritually rich organizational culture. Hamilton and Winston (2022) emphasizes that love at work builds a sense of community, strengthens mutual support,

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and fosters a positive and inclusive environment. This results in improved employee well-being, increased job satisfaction, and a more effective organization. Such benefits boost employee satisfaction. Happy employees tend to be more engaged, have better social interactions, and work harder. Employee happiness enhances organizational performance by increasing productivity, financial success, and customer satisfaction (Hees, 2024). Angeles (2024), Bocarnea et al. (2024), Hees (2024), and Hamilton and Winston's (2022) perspectives align with the impact of RQ2/IQ2.

RQ2/IQ2 underscores the significance of empathetic leadership in corporate settings. It stresses the need for leaders to demonstrate empathy and kindness to create a supportive work environment, which can improve employees' mental and emotional health (Madden, 2024). The insights from this question can guide leadership development initiatives, emphasizing the growth of emotional intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal skills (Jordan, 2025). This question links individual well-being with organizational success, prompting leaders and organizations to adopt a more human-centered leadership style.

Well-Being and Spirituality

Ashforth and Pratt (2015) describe spirituality as an ongoing process—one that serves as a goal in itself rather than a destination that must be reached. In its transcendent form, spirituality involves engaging with the intangible aspects of human experience, such as meaning, purpose, and connection. However, within organizational contexts, they observe a common focus on measurable outcomes and tangible results. Procedures and immaterial elements, including spiritual values, are often viewed as tools to achieve objectives rather than as ends in themselves. Building on this view, Villani et al. (2019) examine the relationship between spirituality, religion, and subjective well-being. Their findings indicate that while both concepts can positively impact personal fulfillment and life satisfaction, the evidence is mixed across studies, highlighting the complexity of how spiritual and religious factors interact with individual well-being. Villani et al. argue that this inconsistency probably stems from inadequate operational definitions of the constructs and from overlooking the moderating effect that people's status may have on the relationship between spirituality/religiosity and subjective well-being, a connection of great importance.

Balzarotti et al. (2016) believe that many factors influence how people assess different parts of their lives, including personal traits that distinguish joyful from discontented personalities, the values people find important and worth pursuing, and the fulfillment of social needs. Ruggeri et al. (2020) suggest that well-being is closely linked to success in professional, personal, and social areas. People with high well-being show increased productivity, better learning ability, greater creativity, more prosocial actions, and healthier relationships.

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Research by Cohen et al. (2025) employs mediation analysis, revealing a complete mediation effect in which the frequency of adverse life events influences well-being by improving positive and negative religious coping methods, compassion, and resilience. Their study uncovers additional mediation pathways through religious coping and resilience. Cohen et al. found that positive religious coping is associated with increased resilience and improved well-being. Conversely, negative religious coping is associated with reduced resilience and lower well-being. Ruggeri et al. (2020) suggest that well-being is defined as the absence of mental illness and the perception of a satisfying life. Furthermore, Ruggeri et al. note that well-being is correlated with success in professional, personal, and interpersonal areas. Individuals with high well-being exhibit greater workplace productivity, improved learning outcomes, increased creativity, more prosocial behaviors, and stronger relationships (Ruggeri et al., 2020).

Aten et al. (2015) emphasize the contradictory role of religion as a coping tool, noting that while it frequently offers comfort during tough times, traumatic events can significantly shake a person's faith. Such disruptions may challenge fundamental beliefs about oneself, the world, and the divine, resulting in spiritual confusion and weakened social support networks. This complexity indicates that religion and spirituality, though often linked to resilience, are not always helpful during struggles (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016; Campbell & Bauer, 2021).

Abu-Raiya et al. (2016) highlight that religious coping, like any psychological strategy, can lead to either positive or negative outcomes depending on how and when it is used. Positive religious coping—marked by spiritual support, forgiveness, and a feeling of divine connection—is usually linked to better adjustment. On the other hand, negative religious coping, which involves spiritual dissatisfaction or seeing the divine as punishing, is associated with greater distress and suffering (Pargament et al., 2000). Szcześniak et al. (2020) observe that seeking God's love and care, reinterpreting difficult situations as chances for growth, and relying on God for strength and comfort during tough times are examples of effective religious coping strategies. O'Brien et al. (2018) mention that disbelief in God's love, viewing a traumatic event as punishment, and feeling abandoned by both God and the faith community are signs of negative religious coping, often called a spiritual crisis or struggle.

Stringer's (2023) observations align with the focus of RQ3/IQ3. RQ3/IQ3 is crucial to the study because it explores the practical implications of each principle for employees' well-being and the overall health of the organization. RQ3/IQ3 emphasizes the significant influence of spiritual leaders who prioritize listening to divine teachings while demonstrating empathy and respect toward their followers. By building trust, emotional wellness, and mutual respect, this approach creates a workplace environment where individuals feel valued and supported. Such an environment not only improves interpersonal relationships but also promotes psychological safety, allowing employees

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to engage more fully and authentically in their roles. As Muss et al. (2025) observe, these conditions are key to boosting morale and increasing productivity, highlighting the strategic importance of relational dynamics in organizational success. By integrating spiritual principles with compassionate leadership, organizations can foster a supportive atmosphere that aligns personal purpose with collective goals, ultimately enhancing overall well-being and performance (Reynaud & Bogacs, 2017). These leadership practices connect spiritual values to workplace dynamics, encouraging holistic growth and long-term success.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework outlined in the literature emphasizes the interaction among leadership, spirituality, communication, and organizational culture. It combines various theories and concepts. Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) highlight the engaging leadership theory, which connects specific leadership behaviors to fulfilling individual needs, boosting motivation, and enhancing work engagement. Spiritual leadership theory, studied by Fry (2003) and Marques et al. (2009), links spiritual principles and ethical leadership to positive organizational results. It emphasizes the role of spirituality in building trust, fostering creativity, and promoting ethical practices. Organizational culture theory, discussed by Jo and Shin (2025) and Kwantes (2024), examines how organizational culture shapes employee attitudes, inclusivity, and well-being. This aligns with leadership's role in fostering diversity and empowerment.

Croucher et al. (2017) and Dimovski (2023) emphasize communication and interpersonal relations, highlighting the importance of effective communication in religious settings and diverse workplaces to foster mutual respect and understanding. Henson (2022) uses biblical and spiritual foundations, drawing on principles like justice and unity, to explore how spiritual formation influences leadership behaviors and organizational environments. These theoretical elements provide a cohesive framework for understanding the role of spiritual leadership in shaping organizational dynamics, supporting well-being, and fostering inclusive and cohesive workplaces.

The conceptual framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of spirituality, well-being, leadership practices, and organizational outcomes. It is based on several key concepts to offer a comprehensive view. As Ashforth and Pratt (2015) explained, spirituality is a transcendent goal characterized by intangible qualities rather than tangible results, often serving as a means rather than an end within organizational contexts. Well-being is incorporated into the framework through its various dimensions, drawing on the work of Balzarotti et al. (2016), Ruggeri et al. (2020), Stringer (2023), and Villani et al. (2019). This includes subjective well-being, personal traits, values, and social needs, positioning well-being as both a contributor to and an outcome of professional, personal, and interpersonal success.

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The framework further includes positive and negative religious coping, based on Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2015), Cohen et al. (2025), and Szcześniak et al. (2020). It distinguishes between positive strategies that build resilience and harmful coping mechanisms linked to spiritual crises or lower well-being. Spiritual leadership and compassionate practices are examined through the research of Muss et al. (2025) and Reynaud and Bogacs (2017), highlighting the role of leaders who incorporate divine teachings and empathy to foster trust, enhance emotional well-being, and boost organizational morale. Leadership, communication, and inclusion are practical elements of the framework, emphasizing the importance of fostering trust, creativity, and respect in diverse workplace settings through effective communication and compassionate leadership, as discussed by Dimovski (2023) and Hoek et al. (2021). This conceptual framework provides a foundation for studying how these concepts interact to influence employees' well-being, leadership effectiveness, and overall organizational health. It offers a perspective to understand the practical application of spiritual principles in leadership and their transformative impact on workplace dynamics.

Methods and Procedures

Phenomenological research develops rigorous methods and procedures to explore the lived experiences of individuals who are purposefully selected because they are relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Wertz, 2023). Semi-structured interviews and participant observations are the main methods used to gather detailed, rich data about participants' experiences and perceptions. The research employs a systematic approach to thematic analysis, which involves transcribing, coding, and interpreting data to identify key themes and patterns that emerge from participants' stories. While methodological triangulation often combines different data collection techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2018), semi-structured interviews and member checking together provide a unique approach. Semi-structured interviews offer depth and flexibility, enabling researchers to gain detailed insights through open-ended questions. At the same time, member checking verifies these insights by involving participants in confirming the accuracy of interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methods enhance data richness, ensure authenticity, and strengthen the study's credibility. They help ensure the interpretations truly reflect participants' perspectives and experiences, reducing bias.

Design

A qualitative research design based on a phenomenological approach is used to examine how organizational spirituality influences well-being and performance in multicultural workplaces. The study aims to answer three main research questions (RQ1/IQ1; RQ2/IQ2; RQ3/IQ3). Semi-structured interviews collect qualitative data from professionals in various industries to explore the relationship among followership,

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creative work environments, leadership dynamics, and effective communication. Data triangulation is employed through multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and written documents, to enhance the credibility and depth of the findings. This method ensures results are not dependent on a single data source and align with the phenomenological approach by capturing the complexity and richness of human experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Noble & Heale, 2019; Wertz, 2023). The study aims to provide valuable insights into how spiritual leadership fosters creativity, trust, motivation, and organizational well-being through authentic interpersonal communication.

Ethical integrity is fundamental to this research, acting as a safeguard and a guiding principle, protecting participants' rights, privacy, and dignity while also shaping methodological choices, promoting transparency, and exemplifying the leadership ethics being investigated. Informed consent is obtained by clearly communicating the study's goals, procedures, and potential risks, enabling participants to make voluntary and informed decisions about their involvement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ensuring confidentiality is equally vital, as researchers safeguard participants' identities and data to maintain trust and uphold ethical standards. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of respecting participants' beliefs and cultural values, fostering an inclusive and ethically responsible research environment (Wertz, 2023). By adhering to these principles, the research complies with ethical guidelines and prioritizes the well-being of all participants.

Participants

The participants in this study are crucial for understanding the phenomenon due to their diverse professional backgrounds, extensive experience, and shared spiritual beliefs. The group includes a 56-year-old female elementary schoolteacher with 30 years of teaching experience in science and mathematics; a 65-year-old male high school teacher with 40 years of experience in history and social studies; and a 57-year-old female logistics professional with 12 years of experience in supply chain management. The group also includes two food service managers: a 35-year-old female with 20 years of restaurant management experience and a 22-year-old male with five years in the fast-food industry. Eligibility criteria require participants to be full-time employees for at least five years, hold strong faith and spiritual beliefs, and be willing to participate in detailed interviews.

Guest et al. (2020) describe data saturation as the point where enough evidence has been collected to support analysis, with numerous examples provided for each category. Saturation significantly impacts the assessment of participant adequacy, requiring thorough engagement with interview questions to fully understand the phenomenon. In qualitative research, saturation occurs when data no longer reveals

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new themes, patterns, or insights, indicating that further data collection is unnecessary (Saunders et al., 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that a small, homogeneous sample can achieve saturation in studies with a specific focus, such as examining the relationship between leadership communication and its effects on followership. In this context, five participants are considered sufficient when the research questions are clear and the participants share similar experiences or backgrounds.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview method gathers qualitative data from a diverse group of professionals across various industries to examine the relationship between followership, creative work environments, leadership dynamics, and effective communication (Galletta, 2013; Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The interviews take place at peaceful locations selected by the participants. The data is transcribed and securely stored on a password-protected desktop with multiple layers of security (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wertz, 2023). This approach provides flexibility in the interview process, allowing for the discovery of unexpected insights and comprehensive perspectives from participants (Galletta, 2013). Carefully choosing participants from fields such as education, logistics, and food service—known for innovative work settings—serves as the initial step in data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants engage in open-ended interviews designed to capture detailed perspectives on their experiences with leadership dynamics, communication techniques, and followership behaviors (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The meticulous data collection process ensures the study's rigor and reliability, which are vital for its success (Galletta, 2013). This process demonstrates that the collected data thoroughly addresses the research problem with complexity, validating its content (Chadd et al., 2025; Perrier et al., 2017; Pfaffenlehner et al., 2025).

Ethical considerations are essential throughout the process, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity (Kaiser, 2009; Wiles et al., 2008). The research follows established ethical standards and guidelines for qualitative studies involving human subjects, promoting a respectful and trustworthy research environment. The data collection provides insights into how organizational spirituality impacts employee well-being and organizational performance in multicultural workplaces. These insights can significantly influence real-world leadership practices, enhance effectiveness, and foster successful followership across various organizational settings. The practical implications of the research findings on leadership offer a meaningful and motivating opportunity, emphasizing the study's practical significance.

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Analysis

The data section includes excerpts from the transcripts relevant to each interview question:

> RQ1/IQ1: Why is the benefit/outcome of spiritual leaders focusing on hearing God's Word while paying attention, empathizing with, and respecting their followers good to the employees and the organization's general well-being?
>
> RQ2/IQ2: How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?
>
> RQ3/IQ3: What is the benefit/outcome of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

The primary goal is to explore and gain deeper insights into organizational spirituality, empowerment, diversity, empathy, and motivation while examining how leaders create positive work environments, boost morale, and increase productivity. Spiritual leadership is identified as a key element in achieving these goals. Data collected from participants is presented based on the main concepts addressed by the study's interview questions. Each of the five participants reviewed their transcripts, revising inaccuracies or removing details considered private or unrelated to the research. The transcripts are carefully edited to address inconsistencies, including incomplete sentences, overly complex phrasing, or speech patterns unsuitable for written form. Responses are systematically assigned italicized codes in brackets (e.g., [*Code: spirituality*]), then grouped into thematic categories for each concept to ensure clarity and organization. After organizing the topics, themes are refined to reduce overlaps within groups.

The participants' responses to the interview questions are presented in three sections, with each code corresponding to a theme arranged to ensure coherence and alignment with the study's goals. To demonstrate how these themes connect to the study's overarching framework, Table 1 provides a crosswalk linking the abstract's key concepts with their representation in the article's conclusion. The results section then presents participants' responses by thematic category, offering rich insight into their lived experiences and perceptions.

Table 1: Framework Integration of Spiritual Leadership Themes

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Abstract theme	Conclusion integration
Integration of spiritual values and emotional intelligence	Essential for cultivating support and guiding ethical, compassionate leadership.
Lived experiences as a lens for understanding leadership	Grounded in the phenomenological emphasis on capturing participants' perceptions and emotional responses to spiritual leadership.
Use of coding to capture meaning-making	Highlighted through in vivo coding methods that organize participant data into themes that align with trust, creativity, and spiritual values.
Focus on organizational well-being and employee satisfaction	Consistently underscored through findings that link compassionate leadership behaviors to improved morale and workplace cohesion.
Thematic alignment with research questions (RQ1–RQ3 / IQ1–IQ3)	Reflected in the structured presentation of results, where participant responses directly speak to creativity, empathy, and the spiritual context of leadership.
Emphasis on trust-building through communication and ethical care	Reinforced through analysis of leaders' respectful and kind interactions, which foster trust and employee engagement.
Participant validation and transcript accuracy	Supported by a transparent data cleaning process, showing methodological rigor and ethical attentiveness to participant privacy and precision.
Link between personal faith and professional leadership	Embedded in conclusions that highlight leaders' spiritual listening and integration of God's Word as drivers of ethical decision-making and organizational culture.

Results

The research participants offer valuable perspectives based on their generational traits, leadership experience, and diverse professional backgrounds. Using an inductive approach, their varied experiences provide a basis for identifying emerging themes and

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patterns without imposing preconceived ideas (Vanover et al., 2021). The group includes two veteran educators, both from the baby boomer generation. One is a female elementary science and mathematics teacher with 30 years of experience, and the other is a male high school history and social studies teacher with 40 years of experience. From Generation X, there is a female professional with 12 years in logistics and supply chain management. Additionally, two millennials share their insights: a female food service manager with 20 years of restaurant management experience and a male manager with five years in the fast-food industry. This inductive exploration of their experiences lays the groundwork for developing meaningful insights, which will be further explored through the interview questions.

RQ1/IQ1: How do you experience the leadership of those who focus on hearing God's Word while paying attention, empathizing with, and respecting you, and how do those experiences influence your sense of personal well-being and your perception of the organization's overall health?

> **Participant 1.** That is a great question. Focusing on the Word of God is essential, if not the most crucial aspect of being a spiritual leader. The Word serves as the foundation for everything. Leaders who focus on God's Word can learn from it and share it with others. It helps to keep them grounded, steering them away from areas they should avoid and ensuring they remain aligned with spiritual values [*Code: spirituality*] [*Code: guidance*] [*Code: alignment*]. By focusing on God's Word, leaders are better equipped to empathize with others, particularly those struggling. The Word allows leaders to offer support without forcing anything onto others. Instead, it encourages individuals to engage with the Word and interpret its meaning for themselves. Proper understanding does not just remain in the mind; it also takes root in the heart. For me, the Word has to be the foundation for every decision, conversation, or action I take as a leader [*Code: empathy*] [*Code: support*] [*Code: understanding*].

Interviewer. That is a compelling viewpoint. From a spiritual standpoint, do you think listening to the Word of God improves your capacity to focus on your employees, understand their feelings, and honor them? In what ways does this influence the comprehensive health of the organization?

> ***Participant.*** I am convinced it does [*Code: firm conviction*]. Listening to the Word aids me in refraining from making unjust evaluations of employees [*Code: unjust assessment*]. Rather than presuming that an individual is indolent or apathetic [*Code: indolent or apathetic*], the Word prompts me to contemplate that various underlying factors may influence their performance or disposition [*Code: underlying factors*]. It allows me to see beyond surface-level issues and try to understand the root causes of their struggles [*Code: fairness*] [*Code: judgment*]

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> [*Code: root causes*]. When leaders engage with situations through empathy and respect [*Code: the lens of compassion and respect*], they cultivate a more nurturing and insightful organizational culture [*Code: nurturing and insightful culture*]. When employees perceive recognition and appreciation [*Code: recognition and gratitude*], it significantly enhances their performance [*Code: enhances performance*] and contributes to the holistic health of the organization [*Code: holistic organizational health*]. This creates an environment where people can thrive and work collaboratively toward shared goals [*Code: organizational culture*] [*Code: motivation*] [*Code: collaboration*].

Interviewer. Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?

> ***Participant.*** The Word of God serves as a guiding light. It is a resource that leaders can always turn to for wisdom and direction. By staying connected to the Word, spiritual leaders can better serve their teams and contribute to the well-being of the entire organization [*Code: wisdom*] [*Code: connection*] [*Code: leadership service*].

Theme 1: The Word of God as the Guiding Foundation for Leadership. This theme highlights the centrality of spirituality and guidance in spiritual leadership. Leaders who focus on hearing the Word of God derive clarity, direction, and alignment with spiritual values, which steer them away from areas of misjudgment and misalignment. The Word is the foundation for leaders' decisions, conversations, and actions, ensuring their leadership remains grounded and purpose driven. By anchoring leadership in the Word, leaders strengthen their ability to support, inspire, and guide their teams effectively.

Theme 2: Fostering Empathy, Respect, and Collaboration through Spiritual Leadership. The interview underscores how hearing the Word of God enhances a leader's empathy, fairness, and respect for their followers. Leaders cultivate a supportive organizational culture by understanding the root causes of employee struggles rather than focusing on surface-level judgments. This environment makes employees feel seen, valued, and motivated, resulting in stronger collaboration and shared goals. The Word also enables leaders to create a workplace where individuals thrive emotionally and professionally, contributing to organizational well-being and success.

Participant 2.

> ***Interviewer.*** What are the benefits of spiritual leaders focusing on hearing the Word of God while showing attentiveness, empathy, and respect toward their followers? How does this approach contribute to employees' well-being and the general health of the organization?

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Participant. Strong listening skills [*Code: listening skills*] are crucial for spiritual leaders as they foster effective communication. By leveraging these skills, leaders can create a supportive work environment [*Code: supportive work environment*] that allows followers to feel understood and valued. From a spiritual perspective, empathy [*Code: empathy*] is a key attribute. It helps leaders identify personal challenges that may affect their team members, leading to a deeper personal connection [*Code: personal connection*] where they can offer support and understanding. This approach significantly improves morale [*Code: improves morale*], ensuring employees feel safe and valued at work. It establishes a team-oriented environment [*Code: team-oriented environment*] where tasks are completed efficiently and accommodating personal needs [*Code: accommodating personal needs*], such as allowing time off to address challenges, becomes standard practice.

Interviewer. Could you provide an example of how this might manifest in a workplace setting from a spiritual perspective?

Participant. Imagine an employee who starts arriving late to work after a period of punctuality. From a spiritual standpoint, I would invite them to a private and open conversation [*Code: private and open conversation*] to explore the issue comfortably. Even if the employee lacks a spiritual background, I will focus on positive guidance [*Code: positive guidance*], reassuring them that challenges can improve. My goal would be to fully understand their situation and help rebuild morale [*Code: rebuild morale*], enabling them to return to punctuality and productivity.

Interviewer. What if the employee does not identify with any spiritual beliefs, but you, as a leader, rely on spirituality to guide your actions? How would you approach this situation without offending the employee?

Participant. Inclusivity is key here. My approach would emphasize inclusivity [*Code: inclusivity*], ensuring employees feel respected regardless of their spiritual beliefs. I would focus on providing support [*Code: providing support*], clarifying that they are not alone and that colleagues are here to help. Employees can share in mutual success by fostering a collaborative environment [*Code: collaborative environment*] while knowing that respecting boundaries [*Code: respecting boundaries*] is a priority. Ensuring the employee feels valued [*Code: valued*] and safe by facilitating time off [*Code: time off*] or letting them know their position is secure [*Code: secure*] are additional ways to offer support.

Interviewer. How do you see such actions influencing the organization as a whole?

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> ***Participant.*** These actions [*Code: build trust and morale*] within teams, improving both individual and group dynamics. When employees experience a [*Code: culture of empathy*], they tend to extend compassion to others, creating a [*Code: compassionate work environment*]. This encourages [*Code: positive reinforcement]*, ensuring that the organization benefits from a cycle of understanding and cooperation that fosters collective success.

Theme 1: Empathy and Connection as Pillars of Supportive Leadership. This theme emphasizes the importance of listening skills, empathy [*Code: empathy*], and personal connection [*Code: personal connection*] in creating a supportive work environment [*Code: supportive work environment*]. By fostering a team-oriented environment [*Code: team-oriented environment*] where leaders provide positive guidance [*Code: positive guidance*] and accommodate personal needs [*Code: accommodating personal needs*], employees feel valued and supported. The participant illustrates how open communication, such as having a private and open conversation [*Code: private and open conversation*], allows leaders to address individual challenges compassionately, improving employee morale and enabling them to re-engage with their work.

Theme 2: Inclusive Communication and Morale Building for Organizational Growth. This theme highlights the value of inclusivity [*Code: inclusivity*] and respecting boundaries [*Code: respecting boundaries*] in spiritual leadership. Leaders create a collaborative environment [*Code: collaborative environment*] by ensuring employees feel supported without imposing personal spiritual values. Offering positive reinforcement [*Code: positive reinforcement*], providing support [*Code: providing support*], and facilitating secure positions [*Code: secure positions*] fosters a culture of empathy [*Code: culture of empathy*] and strengthens trust and morale [*Code: building trust and morale*]. As employees thrive in this compassionate work environment [*Code: compassionate work environment*], they are motivated to contribute positively, reinforcing a cycle of shared success across the organization.

Participant 3.

> ***Interviewer.*** Why is the benefit of spiritual leaders focusing on hearing God's word while paying attention to, empathizing with, and respecting their followers significant for both employees and the overall well-being of the organization?
>
> ***Participant.*** If genuinely called, spiritual leaders must listen and be attentive to the divine message. It is crucial because, without receiving guidance from God, how can a leader successfully direct others by His purpose? God frequently communicates with leaders to guide them in leading His people. I often hear God's voice. For example, a few years back, He guided me to initiate a ministry at my church—a ministry of dance [*Code: ministry of dance*]. Initially, I was hesitant. Yet, there was a time when I sensed a powerful guidance from God.

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While on Richmond Road, I distinctly heard Him say, "You do it" [*Code: divine directive*]. I ventured out confidently, and the ministry thrived for approximately five years until COVID-19 interrupted our gatherings. Upon our attempt to restart after several years, the experience felt different. I eventually approached my pastor, who inquired whether I still had the same ministry passion. At that moment, I understood that I had lost that passion. I understood this as a sign from God indicating that the season for the ministry had come to a close.

Interviewer. This is a compelling illustration of how spiritual leadership can influence actions and decisions. Do you believe that the Word of God impacts the way leaders listen to, empathize with, and show respect for their followers?

Participant. Absolutely. For example, I worked with eight women in the dance ministry, each unique in their talents, opinions, and perspectives [*Code: recognizing diversity*]. They were all adults, not children, so I had to listen to and consider their needs and contributions. To create something meaningful and cohesive, I had to encompass everyone's input and unify it for the group's betterment. Hearing God's Word and reading Scriptures about dancing [*Code: Scriptures about dancing*] helped me lead the ministry with clarity and purpose. Dance became another form of expression and praise to God [*Code: expression and praise to God*], and I had to educate the members of the ministry, as well as the church, on its significance. Some people misunderstood what we were doing, assuming it was just dancing in a casual sense [*Code: dancing in a casual sense*]. However, we reframed it as ministering through music and dance. By changing the terminology and teaching the meaning behind our gestures and movements—like how certain gestures symbolized tears or rain—we gained acceptance and understanding from the congregation [*Code: positive outcome*].

Interviewer. This is a prime example of how spiritual leadership cultivates empathy and understanding. What is your assessment of the influence that servant leadership characteristics have on guiding the community of believers?

Participant. Servant leadership, mainly when guided by God [*Code: guided by God*], creates a positive environment for both the leader and the followers. It requires leaders to serve genuinely without ulterior motives [*Code: without ulterior motives*]. People can always tell when a leader is authentic [*Code: authentic*], and this fosters trust and mutual respect. When leaders prioritize the well-being of their followers and work together toward a shared goal, it benefits the entire organization. Conversely, leadership without authenticity [*Code: without authenticity*] can hinder progress.

Theme 1: Divine Guidance as the Foundation of Spiritual Leadership. The interview reveals that spiritual leaders derive their purpose and direction by listening to God's

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Word, which is portrayed as an essential aspect of their calling. Divine communication not only influences their actions but also validates the authenticity of their leadership. The example of initiating a dance ministry underscores the importance of attentiveness to God's guidance, demonstrating how leaders can recognize and follow divine directives even in moments of hesitation or uncertainty. This connection to divine purpose strengthens the leader's ability to make decisions and facilitates the alignment of organizational objectives with spiritual principles. Moreover, the ability to discern when a ministry has fulfilled its purpose highlights the dynamic nature of spiritual leadership—one that is sensitive to changing seasons and God's will.

Theme 2: Empathy, Diversity, and Unity in Spiritual Leadership. Another key theme is the emphasis on servant leadership characterized by empathy, respect for diversity, and fostering unity among followers. The leader's approach to guiding a group with varied talents and perspectives illustrates the importance of inclusive leadership practices. By recognizing and valuing individual contributions, the leader creates an environment where collaboration thrives. This theme is further exemplified by the intentional efforts to educate and unify the ministry members and the congregation, reframing misconceptions about the dance ministry's purpose. This demonstrates how spiritual leadership fosters understanding, breaks down barriers, and cultivates mutual respect, resulting in positive outcomes for the community

Participant 4.

Interviewer. What are the benefits of spiritual leaders focusing on hearing God's Word while paying attention, empathizing with, and respecting their followers? How does this approach contribute to employees' well-being and the overall health of the organization?

Participant. Hearing the Word of God as a leader is incredibly important. Listening to God's signals and receiving His guidance helps me develop better leadership ideas [*Code: spiritual guidance*]. Spirituality also helps me stay attentive to my team and employees, which is essential for running my organization [*Code: attentiveness to the team*]. It allows me to lead as a servant leader, emphasizing understanding and respecting the thoughts and ideas of my followers [*Code: servant leadership*]. My faith is foundational, and I firmly believe nothing can be achieved without God [*Code: reliance on faith*]. For example, I had employees facing serious personal challenges over the last month. I had no issue granting them time off and listening to their emotions. From a spiritual perspective, this allowed me to counsel and ease their stress [*Code: employee support*]. They could focus on resolving family matters without added work-related anxiety [*Code: compassionate leadership*].

Interviewer. How did that unfold?

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Participant. They took the necessary time off and were able to address their issues at home. They returned feeling supported and less burdened [*Code: positive outcomes for employees*].

Theme 1: Servant Leadership Rooted in Spirituality. Leaders draw strength and guidance from their faith, enabling them to listen attentively, empathize with employees, and respect their individuality. This approach fosters trust and understanding, aligning with the principles of servant leadership.

Theme 2: Compassionate and Supportive Leadership Practices. By offering emotional support and flexibility during personal challenges, leaders demonstrate care for their employees' well-being, contributing to a positive and productive workplace environment.

Participant 5.

Interviewer. Why is the benefit of spiritual leaders focusing on hearing God's Word, while paying attention, empathizing with, and respecting their followers, significant for employees and the organization's overall well-being?

Participant. As a leader, I believe remaining attuned to God [*Code: God is communicating to me*] is essential. This connection empowers me to be a better leader for my team [*Code: be a better leader for my team*]. Before making decisions, I consistently begin with prayer [*Code: begin with prayer*] and draw upon my faith in God's guidance [*Code: my faith in God's guidance*]. Through spirituality, I've learned to be patient [*Code: be patient*], listen effectively [*Code: listen effectively*], and incorporate team ideas [*Code: incorporate team ideas*] to create organizational strategies that resonate with everyone involved.

My leadership style embodies a servant leader mindset [*Code: servant leader mindset*], requiring patience [*Code: patience*], empathy [*Code: empathy*], and flexibility [*Code: flexibility*]. For instance, when a team member encounters personal challenges, I make an effort to understand their situation [*Code: make an effort to understand their situation*] and provide accommodations like granting time off when necessary [*Code: granting time off when necessary*]. In high-pressure environments where frustrations are inevitable, maintaining focus is challenging. Yet, by staying grounded in my faith [*Code: staying grounded in my faith*] and maintaining flexibility [*Code: maintaining flexibility*], I create a supportive environment [*Code: supportive environment*] where all team members feel valued [*Code: valued*].

Interviewer. Do you have specific examples of how God's Word has influenced your leadership approach?

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> ***Participant.*** Absolutely. Whenever frustration arises, I turn to the Bible for guidance [*Code: turn to the Bible for guidance*]. For example, I once faced an issue where a reliable team member was not answering their phone despite appearing to be available [*Code: not answering their phone despite appearing to be available*]. I had to choose between terminating their employment or addressing the issue differently [*Code: terminating their employment or addressing the issue differently*]. Considering her years of excellent performance [*Code: years of excellent performance*], I opted to be patient [*Code: be patient*] and have an open conversation with her [*Code: have an open conversation with her*] to understand the situation.
>
> By relying on God's teachings [*Code: relying on God's teachings*] and avoiding an overly aggressive approach [*Code: avoiding an overly aggressive approach*], I found a constructive resolution. This choice allowed us to move forward without jeopardizing trust [*Code: move forward without jeopardizing trust*]. Such moments deepen my faith in the importance of staying connected to God [*Code: importance of staying connected to God*] and reinforce the value of practicing patience in leadership [*Code: practicing patience in leadership*].

Theme 1: Spirituality as a Foundation for Leadership. Dialogue. "Before making decisions, I always begin with prayer [*Code: begin with prayer*] and rely on my faith in God's guidance [*Code: my faith in God's guidance*]. My spirituality enables me to be patient [*Code: be patient*], listen effectively [*Code: listen effectively*], and incorporate team ideas [*Code: incorporate team ideas*] into organizational strategies. The participant emphasized the role of spirituality in shaping leadership decisions, highlighting how spiritual practices like prayer and Bible reading guide their actions. This foundation helps foster trust, collaboration, and empathy within the team.

Theme 2: Servant Leadership Through Empathy and Flexibility. Dialogue**: "**I approach leadership with a servant leader mindset [*Code: servant leader mindset*], which requires patience [*Code: patience*], empathy [*Code: empathy*], and flexibility [*Code: flexibility*]. For example, if a team member is facing challenges, I make an effort to understand their situation [*Code: make an effort to understand their situation*] and accommodate their needs, such as granting time off when necessary [*Code: granting time off when necessary*]." Participant 5 described how servant leadership involves prioritizing team members' needs and providing support. They create an empowering and productive work environment by addressing challenges empathetically and maintaining flexibility.

Clusters of Codes. The codes listed below were extracted from the transcript analysis and reflect key patterns and themes identified across participant responses.

- Extracted codes:

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- Unjust assessment
- Firm conviction
- Underlying factors
- Root causes
- Recognizing diversity
- God is communicating to me
- My faith in God's guidance
- Begin with prayer
- Turn to the Bible for guidance
- Staying grounded in my faith
- Spiritual guidance
- Reliance on faith
- Guided by God
- Divine directive
- Scriptures about dancing
- Expression and praise to God
- Ministry of dance
- Dancing in a casual sense
- Spirituality
- Make an effort to understand their situation
- Listen effectively
- Empathy
- Lens of compassion
- Accommodating personal needs
- Private and open conversation
- Valued
- Empathy personal connection
- Supportive environment
- Supportive work environment
- Employee support
- Granting time off when necessary
- Positive outcomes for employees
- Inclusivity
- Recognition and gratitude
- Holistic organizational health
- Move forward without jeopardizing trust
- Alignment
- Guidance
- Wisdom
- Authentic

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- Without ulterior motives
- Without authenticity
- Be a better leader for my team
- Servant leader mindset
- Servant leadership
- Leadership service
- Compassionate leadership
- Attentiveness to the team
- Incorporate team ideas
- Building trust and morale
- Positive reinforcement
- Positive guidance
- Collaborative environment
- Team-oriented environment
- Improving morale
- Providing support
- Respecting boundaries
- Faith and spirituality codes:
- God is communicating to me
- My faith in God's guidance
- Begin with prayer
- Turn to the Bible for guidance
- Staying grounded in my faith
- Spiritual guidance
- Reliance on faith
- Guided by God
- Divine directive
- Scriptures about dancing
- Expression and praise to God
- Ministry of dance
- Dancing in a casual sense
- Spirituality
- Leadership and team-oriented mindset codes:
- Be a better leader for my team
- Servant leader mindset
- Servant leadership
- Leadership service
- Compassionate leadership
- Attentiveness to the team
- Incorporate team ideas

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- Building trust and morale
- Positive reinforcement
- Positive guidance
- Collaborative environment
- Team-oriented environment
- Improving morale
- Providing support
- Respecting boundaries
- Empathy and understanding codes:
- Make an effort to understand their situation
- Listen effectively
- Empathy
- Lens of compassion
- Accommodating personal needs
- Private and open conversation
- Valued
- Empathy personal connection
- Support and care for employees codes:
- Supportive environment
- Supportive work environment
- Employee support
- Granting time off when necessary
- Positive outcomes for employees
- Inclusivity
- Recognition and gratitude
- Holistic organizational health
- Guidance and decision-making codes:
- Move forward without jeopardizing trust
- Alignment
- Guidance
- Wisdom
- Analyzing and understanding context codes:
- Authentic
- Without ulterior motives
- Without authenticity
- Authenticity and integrity codes:
- Unjust assessment
- Firm conviction
- Underlying factors
- Root causes

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- Recognizing diversity

RQ2/IQ2: How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?

Participant 1.

> ***Interviewer.*** How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?
>
> ***Participant.*** A situation in my business [*Code: business owner*] comes to mind. I had an individual who struggled deeply with trust [*Code: struggled deeply with trust*]. This person had encountered situations where leadership was inconsistent [*Code: leadership was inconsistent*]—making promises and returning to their word [*Code: making promises and returning to their word*]. Their trust had eroded in the workplace and other areas, like their home and the church [*Code: trust*] [*Code: leadership consistency*].
>
> ***Interviewer.*** Spiritual leadership, I believe, bridges this gap by addressing trust holistically [*Code: addressing trust holistically*].
>
> ***Participant.*** It requires connecting with people at a deeper level [*Code: connecting at a deeper level*] and creating a foundation through prayer, meditation, and shared experiences [*Code: prayer, meditation, and shared experiences*]. Trust is built when individuals start seeing results [*Code: trust is built when seeing results*] when their prayers and efforts lead to tangible successes [*Code: prayers and efforts lead to tangible achievements*]. For example, in my experience, I have seen difficult situations turn around because of collective prayer and belief. Seeing outcomes like someone finding a job after significant challenges reinforces faith and strengthens interpersonal bonds [*Code: spirituality*] [*Code: prayer and meditation*] [*Code: collective success*].
>
> ***Participant.*** I think of biblical examples where faith and belief were demonstrated through actions [*Code: faith and belief demonstrated through actions*], such as adhering to religious dietary practices and proving their health benefits over time [*Code: religious dietary practices and health benefits*]. Similarly, I find it effective to lead by example [*Code: lead by example*]. Sometimes, you must show people results through a test or demonstration [*Code: show results through a test*]. For instance, I encouraged someone to trust God and take steps, like working the required hours to get paid [*Code: trust God and take steps*]. Seeing the practical

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outcomes of their efforts strengthens their belief and builds trust in the process [*Code: belief-building*] [*Code: leading by example*] [*Code: result-driven trust*]**.**

Participant. Communication is key. I believe in asking questions to understand the root of someone's concerns. For example, if someone does not believe it, I would ask them why. What is it they don't believe? What's the roadblock? Once they articulate their doubts, it becomes easier to address them. Without communication, you're left guessing and cannot help effectively [*Code: interpersonal communication*] [*Code: addressing concerns*] [*Code: active listening*].

Participant. Dialogue has to be reciprocal. You won't progress much if it's one-sided, with only one person talking. However, when both parties express their perspectives, there's potential for greater understanding. Even if you agree to disagree on specific points, that is still progress. Disagreement doesn't have to hinder forward movement—it can foster respect and mutual acknowledgment [*Code: mutual understanding*] [*Code: reciprocal dialogue*] [*Code: respect and acknowledgment*]. If someone grows up immersed in spirituality—surrounded by family members who praise God and share their testimonies—it's much easier for them to believe and trust. On the other hand, if someone hasn't been exposed to those experiences, it is harder to reach them through the Word alone. Leaders must work harder to build trust through communication and action in such cases [*Code: exposure to spirituality*] [*Code: upbringing and belief*] [*Code: leadership persistence*].

Theme 1: Building Trust through Holistic and Result-Driven Spiritual Leadership. This theme highlights the role of spiritual leadership in addressing trust [*Code: trust*] by creating a foundation rooted in spirituality [*Code: spirituality*], prayer and meditation [*Code: prayer and meditation*], and collective success [*Code: collective success*]. Trust is cultivated when leaders demonstrate leadership consistency [*Code: leadership consistency*] and lead by example, encouraging belief building [*Code: belief building*] and fostering faith through tangible results like result-driven trust [*Code: result-driven trust*]. The interview underscores how actions and visible outcomes, such as collective prayer leading to success, help individuals regain trust and strengthen interpersonal bonds within an organizational context.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Communication as a Key to Fostering Mutual Understanding and Collaboration. The participant emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communication [*Code: interpersonal communication*] in addressing individual concerns and building connections. By practicing active listening [*Code: active listening*] and addressing concerns [*Code: concerns*] directly, leaders create space for reciprocal dialogue [*Code: reciprocal dialogue*] and mutual understanding [*Code: mutual understanding*]. This open communication fosters respect and acknowledgment [*Code:*

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respect and acknowledgment], enabling progress even amidst disagreements. Furthermore, the interview shows that leaders adapt their communication and actions to bridge gaps in belief, especially for individuals with limited exposure to spirituality [*Code: exposure to spirituality*]. Such persistence enhances trust and collaboration within the organization.

Participant 2.

Interviewer. How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation through genuine interpersonal communication?

Participant. "Are we focusing on genuine communication from an interpersonal perspective?"

Interviewer. From a leadership perspective, interpersonal skills are critical in the workplace. Would you agree?

Participant. It is very important to understand how they are doing and where they are in their lives [*Code: understanding each individual*]. Maintaining an open-door policy is crucial for building these connections [*Code: open-door policy*].

Interviewer. Do you believe it is essential for spiritual leaders to have strong communication skills? If so, can you elaborate?

Participant. Yes, it is essential. From a spiritual perspective, effective communication helps establish mutual respect, a two-way street [*Code: mutual respect*]. Even if an individual does not have a spiritual background, it is important to foster an environment where they respect the leader's spiritual values and feel comfortable sharing their concerns [*Code: fostering respect and comfort*]. Leaders need to create a space where followers feel safe to express themselves, especially if personal issues are affecting their ability to complete tasks [*Code: safe space for expression*]. This open communication boosts morale and enables employees to re-engage with their work [*Code: boosting morale*].

Interviewer. Trust and motivation play key roles in fostering creativity and bringing out the best in employees. Can you explain how those elements are connected?

Participant. Trust is critical. Employees need to know that their leaders have their backs and will advocate for them when morale is low [*Code: leaders advocating for employees*]. This sense of trust allows them to feel secure and valued [*Code: feeling secure and valued*]. Spiritual leaders, in particular, can use their perspective to share insights that might uplift and inspire employees [*Code:*

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uplifting and inspiring employees]. Respect is a big part of this process—it is about creating a dialogue where employees feel heard and leaders can provide spiritual guidance, if appropriate, to help rebuild morale [*Code: creating dialogue and providing guidance*].

Interviewer. Would you say that fostering trust and motivation is a positive direction for organizations to move toward?

Participant. Organizations that emphasize trust, motivation, and effective communication create environments where employees feel supported [*Code: supportive environment*]. When employees trust their leaders and feel respected, they are more likely to contribute positively to the team [*Code: contributing positively*]. Knowing that their superiors and the organization are there for them enhances individual and collective performance [*Code: enhancing performance*].

Interviewer. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the role of trust and motivation in spiritual leadership?

Participant. Trust is fundamental to effective communication. Employees want to know that their superiors are approachable and supportive [*Code: approachable and supportive leaders*]. Feeling comfortable in the workplace, knowing they are part of a strong team, and trusting that their leaders will support them in challenging times—all of this motivates employees to perform well [*Code: comfortable workplace*]. It is about creating an environment where everyone is on the same team and working together for mutual success [*Code: mutual success*].

Theme 1: Interpersonal Communication as a Foundation for Trust, Creativity, and Morale. This theme highlights the significance of mutual respect [*Code: mutual respect*] and understanding each individual [*Code: understanding each individual*] in fostering strong interpersonal communication. Spiritual leaders who maintain an open-door policy [*Code: open-door policy*] create safe spaces for expression [*Code: safe spaces for expression*], allowing followers to feel comfortable sharing concerns and personal challenges. This open communication not only boosts morale [*Code: boosts morale*] but establishes mutual trust [*Code: mutual trust*], which enables creativity and collaboration within the organization. Employees are motivated and engaged when they perceive leaders as supportive and attentive to their needs.

Theme 2: Trust and Respect as Drivers of Employee Motivation and Organizational Success. This theme underscores the crucial role of trust in driving employee motivation and overall organizational performance. Leaders who advocate for employees [*Code: advocate for employees*] and create a supportive environment [*Code: supportive environment*] foster feeling secure and valued [*Code: feeling secure and valued*], which strengthens morale. By uplifting and inspiring employees [*Code: uplifting and inspiring*

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employees] through effective communication and creating dialogue and providing guidance [*Code: creating dialogue and providing guidance*], leaders empower individuals to contribute positively to the team. A culture built on approachable and supportive leaders [*Code: approachable and supportive leaders*] and a comfortable workplace [*Code: comfortable workplace*] encourages collaboration and aligns employees with shared organizational goals, resulting in mutual success [*Code: mutual success*].

Participant 3.

> ***Interviewer.*** How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?
>
> ***Participant.*** My experience has shown how God's calling [*Code: God's calling*] plays a significant role in leadership. When I began the dance ministry [*Code: dance ministry*], I initially faced initial resistance [*Code: initial resistance*], feeling unsure about taking on the responsibility. However, through open communication [*Code: open communication*], I guided the group effectively. If issues arose, we discussed it [Code: effective communication], ensuring every member's opinion was included. We used a collaborative process [*Code: collaborative process*] to make decisions, such as choosing songs that were appropriate for ministering through dance [*Code: appropriate for ministering through dance*]. This ensured everyone felt their voice [*Code: voice*] mattered and contributed to the ministry's success.
>
> ***Interviewer.*** Open communication and collaboration seem central to your approach. How did trust and creativity influence the group's dynamics?
>
> ***Participant.*** Trust was essential. I relied on the group's input [*Code: group's input*], recognizing each member's unique talents. Together, we created something beautiful that the church loved [*Code: beautiful that the church loved*]. People appreciated our efforts, and attendance at our third-Sunday services increased significantly [*Code: attendance at our third-Sunday services increased significantly*]. We prioritized building relationships [*Code: building relationships*] outside our ministry activities. Rehearsals often involved praise and worship [*Code: praise and worship*], which deepened our connection. We also formed supportive relationships [*Code: supportive relationships*] by encouraging one another through personal challenges, fostering a strong sense of community.
>
> ***Interviewer.*** How can this leadership approach be applied to other organizational settings?

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Participant. It begins with genuine feedback [*Code: genuine feedback*] and a willingness to work together [*Code: willingness to work together*]. Leaders must remain open to feedback [*Code: open to feedback*] and use problem-solving [*Code: problem-solving*] to address challenges effectively. This process strengthens trust and motivation [*Code: trust and motivation*], ultimately resulting in community success [*Code: community success*].

Theme 1: Open Communication as the Foundation for Collaboration and Community. This theme emphasizes the transformative power of open communication [*Code: open communication*] and effective communication [*Code: effective communication*], demonstrating how God's calling [*Code: God's calling*] inspires leaders to foster collaboration and inclusion. By maintaining an environment rooted in a collaborative process [*Code: collaborative process*], leaders ensure that each member's voice [*Code: voice*] is heard and valued, allowing the group's input [*Code: group's input*] to drive decision-making. Through practices like building relationships [*Code: building relationships*] and providing genuine feedback [*Code: genuine feedback*], leaders cultivate trust and strengthen bonds within the community. The willingness to work together [*Code: willingness to work together*] and remain open to feedback [*Code: open to feedback*] further reinforces mutual respect, creating a foundation for successful collaboration and community building.

Theme 2: Trust and Motivation as Keys to Success and Growth. This theme highlights how trust and motivation are essential in driving growth and fostering creativity. While initial challenges, such as initial resistance [*Code: initial resistance*], may arise, leaders empower individuals by acknowledging their contributions—whether through activities appropriate for ministering through dance [*Code: appropriate for ministering through dance*] or creating outcomes that are beautiful that the church loves [*Code: beautiful that the church loves*]. Celebrating accomplishments, such as the successful execution of a worship performance [*Code: worship performance*] or the visible joy expressed by congregants [*Code: congregational joy*], reinforces a culture of affirmation and spiritual creativity. Practices like praise and worship [*Code: praise and worship*] deepen connections, while supportive relationships [*Code: supportive relationships*] build a robust sense of community. Leaders use problem-solving [*Code: problem-solving*] to overcome challenges and cultivate trust, resulting in community success [*Code: community success*] that reflects the dynamic interplay of spiritual connection and organizational growth.

Participant 4.

Interviewer. How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through genuine interpersonal communication?

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Participant. In my organization, creativity is incredibly important. Trust is also vital. To motivate people and keep them in good spirits, I focus on creativity, whether scheduling, empowering employees, or encouraging them to share ideas and push for innovation [*Code: fostering creativity*]. By doing this, I build trust because it makes employees feel they are part of something meaningful rather than just showing up to work without being heard [*Code: building trust*]. This approach motivates them because they feel empowered, lifting their spirits and helping them become effective problem solvers [*Code: employee motivation*]. It's not perfect, but it works well most of the time, as it encourages employees to solve challenges and be more engaged [*Code: empowerment and engagement*].

Themes 1: Fostering Creativity and Innovation. Effective spiritual leaders inspire creativity [*Code: creativity*] through empowering employees [*Code: empowering employees*] and fostering open communication [*Code: open communication*]. By encouraging idea sharing [*Code: encouraging idea sharing*] and embracing innovation [*Code: innovation*], leaders create a forward-thinking environment [*Code: forward-thinking environment*] that motivates individuals to think dynamically and contribute meaningfully to organizational growth.

Theme 2: Building Trust and Motivating Employees. Spiritual leaders emphasize genuine interpersonal communication [*Code: genuine interpersonal communication*] to establish trust [*Code: establish trust*] and strengthen relationships. When employees feel heard [*Code: feel heard*] and feel valued [*Code: feel valued*], they are empowered to engage in problem-solving [*Code: problem-solving*] and contribute positively to a workplace culture [*Code: workplace culture*] rooted in collaboration and respect. This foundation of trust [*Code: trust*] drives motivation [*Code: motivation*] and helps build a supportive and harmonious organizational atmosphere.

Participant 5.

Interviewer. How does your organization demonstrate that spiritual leaders foster creativity, trust, and motivation among followers through general or genuine interpersonal communication?

Participant. My faith in God [*Code: faith in God*] significantly shapes my communication and leadership [*Code: communication and leadership*] approach. From an interpersonal perspective, I find it vital to engage in conversations beyond work-related topics [*Code: vital to engage in conversations beyond work-related topics*]. For example, I often connect with a team member specializing in sports medicine [*Code: sports medicine*]. Discussing areas like NFL free agency [*Code: NFL free agency*] or recent NBA developments [*Code: NBA developments*] fosters a sense of camaraderie [*Code: sense of camaraderie*]. These interactions create moments of genuine connection [*Code: genuine connection*], helping to build

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> trust and rapport [*Code: build trust and rapport*] within the team. I prioritize maintaining open communication [*Code: maintaining open communication*] by checking in with team members about their day or weekend plans [*Code: day or weekend plans*]. Even when responses are brief, my efforts to keep communication lines open [*Code: keep communication lines open*] reassure them that I'm approachable and that they can approach me with concerns [*Code: approach me with concerns*]. These small exchanges help me understand team members' personalities and triggers [*Code: understand team members' personalities and triggers*], leading to smoother collaboration [*Code: smoother collaboration*]. This leadership approach aligns with patience [*Code: patience*] and a servant leadership perspective [*Code: servant leadership perspective*]. While achieving organizational goals [*Code: organizational goals*] is essential, I prioritize the well-being and mental health [*Code: well-being and mental health*] of my team. I ensure they feel supported and empowered by providing resources and flexibility [*Code: resources and flexibility*], such as allowing time off when necessary [*Code: allowing time off when necessary*]. My spirituality enhances my ability to lead [*Code: spirituality enhances my ability to lead*], offering guidance [*Code: guidance*] and helping me stay humble [*Code: humble*]. It reminds me to prioritize people over the bottom line [*Code: prioritize people over the bottom line*], enabling me to create an environment where humility fosters a supportive and empowering work environment [*Code: humility fosters a supportive and empowering work environment*]. This ultimately contributes to the success of the team and the organization.

Theme 1: Faith as a Guiding Influence in Leadership. Dialogue excerpt: "My faith in God [*Code: faith in God*] strongly influences my approach to communication and leadership [*Code: communication and leadership*]. From an interpersonal communication perspective, I believe it is vital to engage in conversations beyond work-related topics [*Code: vital to engage in conversations beyond work-related topics*]." The participant highlighted how their faith guides their leadership style, inspiring them to build meaningful interpersonal connections. These moments of camaraderie foster trust and rapport, essential for creating a collaborative and motivated team.

Theme 2: Servant Leadership and Open Communication. Dialogue excerpt: "This leadership approach is rooted in patience [*Code: patience*] and a servant leadership perspective [*Code: servant leadership perspective*]. While I recognize the importance of organizational goals [*Code: organizational goals*], I prioritize the well-being and mental health [*Code: well-being and mental health*] of my team members." The participant emphasized the role of servant leadership in creating an empathetic and supportive environment. By maintaining open communication and prioritizing team members' well-being, they cultivate trust and motivation, contributing to a positive and productive organizational culture.

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Clusters of Codes. The codes listed below were extracted from the transcript analysis and reflect key patterns and themes identified across participant responses.

Extracted codes:

- Fostering creativity
- Building trust
- Employee motivation
- Empowerment and engagement
- Creativity
- Empowering employees
- Open communication
- Encouraging idea sharing
- Innovation
- Forwarding-thinking environment
- Genuine interpersonal communication
- Establish trust
- Feel heard
- Feel valued
- Problem-solving
- Workplace culture
- Trust
- Motivation
- Understanding each individual
- Open-door policy
- Mutual respect
- Fostering respect and comfort
- Safe space for expression
- Boosting morale
- Leaders advocating for employees
- Feeling secure and valued
- Uplifting and inspiring employees
- Creating dialogue and providing guidance
- Supportive environment
- Contributing positively
- Enhancing performance
- Approachable and supportive leaders
- Comfortable workplace
- Mutual success
- Faith in God
- Communication and leadership
- Vital to engage in conversations beyond work-related topics

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- Sports medicine
- NFL free agency
- NBA developments
- Sense of camaraderie
- Genuine connection
- Build trust and rapport
- Maintaining open communication
- Keep communication lines open
- Servant leadership perspective
- Well-being and mental health
- Allowing time off when necessary
- Humility fosters a supportive and empowering work environment
- Business owner
- Struggled deeply with trust
- Leadership was inconsistent
- Making promises and returning to their word
- Trust
- Leadership consistency
- Addressing trust holistically
- Connecting at a deeper level
- Prayer, meditation, and shared experiences
- Trust is built when seeing results
- Prayers and efforts lead to tangible achievements
- Spirituality
- Prayer and meditation
- Collective success
- Faith and belief demonstrated through actions
- Religious dietary practices and health benefits
- Lead by example
- Show results through a test
- Trust God and take steps
- Belief-building
- Leading by example
- Result-driven trust
- Interpersonal communication
- Addressing concerns
- Active listening
- Mutual understanding
- Reciprocal dialogue
- Respect and acknowledgment
- Exposure to spirituality
- Upbringing and belief

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  - Leadership persistence
  - God's calling
  - Dance ministry
  - Initial resistance
  - Open communication
  - Effective communication
  - Collaborative process
  - Appropriate for ministering through dance
  - Voice
  - Group's input
  - Beautiful that the church loved
  - Attendance at our third-Sunday services increased significantly
  - Building relationships
  - Praise and worship
  - Supportive relationships
  - Genuine feedback
  - Willingness to work together
  - Open to feedback
  - Problem-solving
  - Trust and motivation
  - Community success

- Leadership and communication codes:
- Communication and leadership
- Maintaining open communication
- Keep communication lines open
- Servant leadership perspective
- Understanding each individual
- Open-door policy
- Approachable and supportive leaders
- Effective communication
- Collaborative process
- Creating dialogue and providing guidance
- Genuine interpersonal communication
- Addressing concerns
- Active listening
- Reciprocal dialogue
- Mutual respect
- Respect and acknowledgment
- Trust and relationships codes:
- Build trust and rapport

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- Genuine connection
- Sense of camaraderie
- Building relationships
- Supportive relationships
- Trust
- Leadership consistency
- Addressing trust holistically
- Struggled deeply with trust
- Making promises and returning to their word
- Trust is built when seeing results
- Result-driven trust
- Belief-building
- Faith and belief demonstrated through actions
- Trust God and take steps
- Mutual understanding
- Employee well-being and motivation codes:
- Well-being and mental health
- Allowing time off when necessary
- Boosting morale
- Leaders advocating employees
- Feeling secure and valued
- Uplifting and inspiring employees
- Empowerment and engagement
- Motivating employees
- Comfortable workplace
- Workplace culture
- Supporting environment
- Community success
- Problem-solving
- Creativity and innovation codes:
- Fostering creativity
- Empowering employees
- Encouraging idea sharing
- Innovation
- Creativity
- Forward-thinking environment
- Appropriate for ministering through dance
- Spirituality and faith codes:
- Faith in God
- God's calling

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- Prayer, meditation, and shared experiences
- Spirituality
- Prayer and meditation
- Collective success
- Praise and worship
- Exposure to spirituality
- Upbringing and belief
- Workplace and organizational dynamics codes:
- Business owner
- Dance ministry
- Initial resistance
- Group's input
- Voice
- Community success
- Mutual success
- Contributing positively
- Enhancing performance
- Leadership practices and examples codes:
- Religious dietary practices and health benefits
- Lead by example
- Leading by example
- Show results through a test

RQ3/IQ3: How do you experience spiritual leaders who actively pursue personal growth while supporting the development of others in diverse communities, and how does their approach to delegation and empowerment influence your own sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being within the organization?

Participant 1.

Interviewer. What is the benefit of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

Participant. The word "invest" really stands out when reflecting on this principle. What you get from any endeavor is directly tied to what you put into it. For spiritual leaders, this means investing time, genuine effort, spirit, and care into their teams and organizations [*Code: empowerment*]. It is about showing people their needs and finding ways to meet them. For example, if someone needs to leave work earlier to spend time with their family, you find ways to accommodate that by adjusting schedules. You are investing in their well-being

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[*Code: well-being*]. Delegation is another key element. People have different needs and strengths. Some might require more guidance than others, and that's okay. By recognizing these differences and leveraging the talents of everyone in the organization, you create a more collaborative and supportive environment [*Code: diversity*].

Participant. Delegation is crucial. It ensures that everyone has a role and contributes to the process. Sometimes, coworkers may connect better with one another than with management, so allowing them to help and support each other builds trust and camaraderie [*Code: trust*]. Empowerment is also essential. Giving individuals the power to express their ideas and opinions without fear of judgment makes a significant difference. It allows them to feel heard and valued. For example, granting someone the authority to help a colleague fosters a sense of responsibility and inclusion. It reinforces their role as an integral part of the team [*Code: empowerment*]. When individuals feel that their abilities and knowledge are recognized, it gives them a sense of worth and achievement [*Code: motivation*]. My experience has shown that this approach is far more effective than simply giving orders or lecturing. It creates a dynamic where people feel like true collaborators rather than just employees following instructions [*Code: collaboration*].

Participant. To me, spiritual leadership is about authenticity. It is not about pretending to be someone you're not or trying to impress others with superficial knowledge. It is about being genuine, showing humility, and connecting with people on a deeper level. Leaders must ensure their team members never feel like they're just small, insignificant parts of the organization. Instead, they must feel valued, connected, and part of something greater [*Code: authenticity*]. Humility is critical. Spiritual leaders must acknowledge that they are not perfect and are still growing and learning. I ask for forgiveness daily, sometimes multiple times a day—because I know I fall short. Spiritual leadership strives to make others feel how we want to feel—respected, valued, and loved [*Code: humility*].

Participant 2.

Interviewer. What are the benefits of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

Participant. This principle often centers on diverse workplaces [*Code: diverse workplaces*] and its importance in promoting growth. Diversity allows organizations to benefit from diversity [*Code: diversity brings ideas*] shaped by unique cultures and perspectives [*Code: unique cultures and perspectives*]. When

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individuals with varied backgrounds come together, they can collaborate and inspire [*Code: fostering collaboration and creativity*]. For example, in my own experience, diversity fosters shared knowledge [*Code: sharing knowledge*] and an exchange of perspectives [*Code: exchanging perspectives*], which leads to organizational enrichment [*Code: organizational enrichment*].

Interviewer. How does delegation impact team dynamics within a diverse workplace?

Participant. Delegation must be done fairly [*Code: delegating fairly*]. Treating team members equally is essential, ensuring equity [*Code: treating equally*] and maintaining shared goals [*Code: shared goals*]. By practicing equitable delegation [*Code: equitable delegation*], leaders can create opportunities for boosting morale [*Code: boosting morale*] and avoiding exclusion [*Code: avoiding exclusion*]. This approach enhances employee engagement and promotes a culture of sustained, motivated contribution [*Code: motivated contribution*].

Interviewer. Can you share an experience that exemplifies the importance of empowerment in a professional setting?

Participant. Years ago, I was a qualified employee [*Code: qualified employee*] with substantial training and experience. However, I witnessed unfair promotion [*Code: unfair promotion*] that overlooked my potential and led to morale plummeting [*Code: morale plummeting*]. Although it challenged my faith initially, I eventually regained faith [*Code: regained faith*] through reflection and perseverance. This faith helped me recognize new opportunities [*Code: new opportunities*] and ultimately find a workplace where I was respected [*Code: finding respect*].

Theme 1: The Role of Diversity and Fair Delegation in Fostering Organizational Success. This theme emphasizes the critical importance of diverse workplaces [*Code: diverse workplaces*] and empowering employees [*Code: empowering employees*] in driving creativity and collaboration. The participant highlights that diversity brings together individuals with unique cultures and perspectives [*Code: unique cultures and perspectives*], which fosters collaboration and creativity [*Code: collaboration and creativity*] and prevents organizations from being constrained by a single mindset. Delegating fairly [*Code: delegating fairly*] within diverse workplaces ensures equitable delegation [*Code: equitable delegation*] and equal opportunity [*Code: equal opportunity*], creating an environment where employees feel valued and can contribute toward shared goals.

Theme 2: Empowerment and Respect as Catalysts for Employee Morale and Trust. This theme emphasizes the importance of empowerment and respect in fostering employee morale and trust. When employees are treated as integral parts [*Code: integral parts*] of

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the organization, free from favoritism [*Code: favoritism*], it enhances morale [*Code: morale*] and prevents feelings of exclusion or stereotyping. Empowerment through delegation encourages contribution [*Code: motivated contribution*] and connects employees more deeply with the organization. Additionally, the participant's personal experience reflects the detrimental effects of unfair promotion [*Code: unfair promotion*] and the lack of genuine reassurance [*Code: genuine reassurance*] but also highlights the redemptive power of resilience and regained faith [*Code: regained faith*] in finding new opportunities where respect and value are restored.

Participant 3.

Interviewer. What is the benefit of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

Participant. To answer that, I will return to when God called me [Code: God called me] to lead my church's dance ministry [*Code: dance ministry*]. I heard God clearly [*Code: heard God clearly*] and understood that I needed to prepare for this role [*Code: prepare for this role*]. To guide the team effectively, I first had to deeply understand [*Code: deeply understand*] what I was leading them into. This involved studying and training [*Code: studying and training*] in dance theory for an entire year to learn various styles. I also invited team members to join me in these classes. While only one participated, this preparation allowed me to equip myself to lead [*Code: equip myself to lead*].

Interviewer. That is a great example of preparation. Did you use delegation as part of your leadership within the ministry?

Participant. Yes. Within the group, we divided responsibilities [*Code: divided responsibilities*] to ensure everyone had a role. For instance, one member handled choreography [*Code: choreography*], another managed scheduling [*Code: scheduling*], and someone else led us in prayer and warmups [*Code: prayer and warmups*] before each rehearsal. Each person contributed ideas [*Code: contributed ideas*] for music or movement, which made the process collaborative. Delegation fostered empowerment [*Code: empowerment*], as members took their tasks seriously. For instance, the person responsible for birthdays ensured we celebrated special occasions [*Code: special occasions*], which strengthened group unity.

Interviewer. How did this empowerment affect the group's overall dynamics?

Participant. It created ownership and belonging [*Code: ownership and belonging*] within the ministry. Everyone felt they were a vital part [*Code: a vital part*] of the

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team, evident in their dedication [*Code: dedication*]. For example, one member commuted long distances *[Code: commuted long distances*] every week but always made it to rehearsals. She often said how much the ministry inspired her [*Code: the ministry inspired her*], lifting her spirits and giving her joy for the week. This shared commitment turned the group into more than just a ministry—it became a community and family [*Code: community and family*] bonded by mutual respect and purpose.

Interviewer. That is such a meaningful and impactful experience. Based on this, how would you describe compelling organizational spirituality?

Participant. I believe compelling organizational spirituality [*Code: organizational spirituality*] requires people to share unity of purpose [*Code: unity of purpose*], centered on their believe in God [*Code: belief in God*]. When everyone follows His teachings and works harmoniously, incredible things happen. It fosters an environment where God's presence [*Code: God's presence*] can be felt, bringing uplifting and remarkable outcomes.

Theme 1: Preparation and Personal Development in Spiritual Leadership. The interview highlights the significance of spiritual leaders investing in their personal development to fulfill their roles effectively. The example of preparing to lead a dance ministry demonstrates the leader's commitment to equipping themselves by studying, reading, and even enrolling in a year-long course on dance theory. This preparation enabled the leader to guide the team with confidence and clarity. The leader demonstrated the importance of continuous growth and learning by inviting team members to participate in the learning process, even if only one member joined. This emphasis on preparation underscores the belief that spiritual leadership requires a calling and intentional effort to understand the responsibilities. The foundation of preparation ultimately strengthens the leader's ability to serve and develop others.

Theme 2: Empowerment and Delegation as Building Blocks for the Community. Another critical theme is empowering followers through delegation and shared responsibilities. The leader's approach of assigning roles within the dance ministry allowed each member to contribute meaningfully, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging. Simple yet impactful tasks, such as tracking birthdays, became more significant as members poured their hearts into their roles, feeling valued and important. This culture of empowerment and shared responsibility led to strong dedication and connection within the group, as evidenced by consistent attendance and members' commitment, even from those traveling long distances. The camaraderie and mutual respect that emerged transformed the ministry into a close-knit family, demonstrating how delegation increases efficiency and cultivates a vibrant, unified community.

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Participant 4.

Interviewer. What is the benefit outcome of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

Participant. It is imperative to stay in tune and keep up with training from a leadership perspective. As leaders, we need to stay on top of our responsibilities. Training plays a significant role in that. I strongly believe in keeping myself trained and open to change [*Code: continuous self-development*]. In our line of business, staying current with systems is crucial, as they frequently evolve. This requires constant development [*Code: adapting to industry changes*].

Equally, it is vital for me, as a leader, to ensure my team is also developing. Millennials and Generation Z are data-savvy and hungry for information. Providing opportunities to work with new data and information enhances their abilities, encourages creativity, and keeps them motivated [*Code: fostering team development*]. For example, I delegate training sessions for leaders and team members. This exposes them to valuable experiences, like attending meetings with other leaders, and they return inspired to share their learning with the rest of the team [*Code: delegation and empowerment*]. Our office is very diverse, with a good balance of women, men, and different races. I ensure everyone gets equal opportunities for additional training and development, reinforcing their sense of value and importance to the organization [*Code: promoting diversity and inclusion*].

Theme 1: Empowering Diverse Teams through Development. Effective spiritual leaders prioritize team members' growth by fostering opportunities for skill enhancement, exposure, and empowerment. Delegating responsibilities and training supports employee confidence and drives innovation within diverse communities.

Theme 2: Commitment to Continuous Self-Improvement and Adaptability. Leaders' investment in their development ensures they remain adaptable to industry changes, serving as role models and equipping them to guide their teams effectively.

Participant 5.

Interviewer. What are the benefits or outcomes of spiritual leaders demonstrating the development of self and others in diverse communities as they foster delegation and empowerment?

Participant. I believe it is essential to praise God [*Code: praise God*] for allowing me to approach leadership with an open mind [*Code: approach leadership with an open mind*]. Delegation and empowerment are key components of my leadership style [*Code: key components of my leadership style*]. They allow team members to feel

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a sense of belonging and significance [*Code: sense of belonging and significance*] within the organization while also alleviating some of my workload [*Code: alleviating some of my workload*].

As a business owner, I know there are areas where I need help [*Code: areas where I need help*], and I humbly reach out to my team [*Code: humbly reach out to my team*] for assistance. Whether it is asking them to double-check something [*Code: asking them to double-check something*] or designating one as the office manager while I am away [*Code: designating one as the office manager while I am away*], delegation ensures tasks are managed effectively [*Code: managed effectively*].

Interviewer. Could you share an example of how you've empowered a team member?

Participant. Over the years, I have built strong relationships with my team [*Code: built strong relationships with my team*], empowering them to make decisions independently and confidently [*Code: make decisions independently and confidently*]. For instance, when I'm not in the office, the designated office manager assumes responsibility [*Code: designated office manager assumes responsibility*] for running the business like theirs. This stems from the trust and support I have demonstrated [*Code: trust and support I have demonstrated*], which helps them feel confident in their role [*Code: feel confident in their role*].

Interviewer. How does delegation and empowerment address challenges with team members?

Participant. Delegation is essential for solving challenges with team members [*Code: solving challenges with team members*]. Many employees feel undervalued [*Code: undervalued*], which can lead to dissatisfaction or even leaving the company. By delegating meaningful responsibilities [*Code: delegating meaningful responsibilities*] and empowering them [*Code: empowering them*], I help team members enhance their skills and exceed expectations [*Code: enhance their skills and exceed expectations*]. This approach fosters loyalty [*Code: loyalty*], strengthens professional relationships [*Code: professional relationships*], and builds interpersonal connections [*Code: interpersonal connections*] within the organization.

Interviewer. How has delegation and empowerment helped your business?

Participant. These practices have greatly improved employee retention [*Code: employee retention*] and overall operational efficiency [*Code: overall operational efficiency*]. When team members are given the authority to make decisions [*Code: authority to make decisions*], they feel less stressed [*Code: less stressed*] and more

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confident [*Code: more confident*]. Even if their decisions are not perfect [*Code: not perfect*], we discuss and refine processes together [*Code: discuss and refine processes together*] to ensure continuous improvement.

Interviewer. Has your faith influenced your ability to establish delegation and empowerment within your team?

Participant. My faith has played a crucial role [*Code: faith has played a crucial role*]. It humbles me [*Code: humbles me*] and helps me place myself in the shoes of my team members [*Code: place myself in the shoes of my team members*]. I strongly believe that followership is essential to leadership [*Code: followership is essential to leadership*]. As a business owner, I embrace flexibility [*Code: embrace flexibility*] and ensure I am willing to perform any task [*Code: willing to perform any task*] I ask of my team. Leading by example [*Code: leading by example*] has earned their respect and strengthened their willingness to follow my guidance.

Theme 1: Empowerment and Delegation as Catalysts for Success. Dialogue Excerpt: "Delegation and empowerment are key components of my leadership style [*Code: key components of my leadership style*]. They help team members feel a sense of belonging and significance [*Code: sense of belonging and significance*] within the organization while also alleviating some of my workload [*Code: alleviating some of my workload*]." The participant emphasized the importance of delegation and empowerment in fostering team members' confidence, encouraging loyalty, and strengthening their contributions to organizational success.

Theme 2: Faith and Humility as Foundations for Leadership. Dialogue Excerpt: **"**My faith has played a crucial role [Code: faith has played a crucial role]**.** It humbles me [*Code: humbles me*] and allows me to place myself in the shoes of my team members [*Code: place myself in the shoes of my team members*]. The participant highlighted how their faith shapes their leadership approach, fostering humility and flexibility. They cultivate a supportive and empowered organizational environment by leading through example and mutual respect.

Clusters of Codes. The codes listed below were extracted from the transcript analysis and reflect key patterns and themes identified across participant responses.

- Extracted codes:
    - Praise God
    - Approach leadership with an open mind
    - Key components of my leadership style
    - Sense of belonging and significance
    - Alleviating some of my workload
    - Areas where I need help

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- Humbly reach out to my team
- Managed effectively
- Built strong relationships with my team
- Designated office manager assumes responsibility
- Trust and support demonstrated
- Solving challenges with team members
- Enhance their skills and exceed expectations
- Faith has played a crucial role
- Leading by example
- Key components of my leadership style
- Sense of belonging and significance
- Alleviating some of my workload
- Faith has played a crucial role
- Humbles me
- Place myself in the shoes of my team members
- Diverse workplaces
- Empowering employees
- Diversity brings ideas
- Unique cultures and perspectives
- Fostering collaboration and creativity
- Sharing knowledge
- Exchanging perspectives
- Organizational enrichment
- Delegating fairly
- Treating equally
- Boosting morale
- Avoiding exclusion
- Motivated contribution
- Faith challenged
- Regained faith
- God called me
- Dance ministry
- Heard God clearly
- Prepare for this role
- Deeply understand
- Studying and training
- Equip to lead
- Divided responsibilities
- Prayer and warmups
- Contributed ideas
- Empowerment
- Ownership and belonging

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- Community and family
- Organizational spirituality
- God's presence
- Continuous self-development
- Adapting to industry changes
- Fostering team development
- Delegation and empowerment
- Promoting diversity and inclusion
- Empowerment
- Well-being
- Diversity
- Trust
- Motivation
- Collaboration
- Authenticity
- Humility
- Responsibility
- Recognition
- Inclusion
- Connecting deeper
- Leadership growth
- Supportive environment
- Forgiveness
- Investing in diversity and empowerment
- Investing time, effort, and care
- Diverse needs and strengths
- Fostering delegation and empowerment
- Supportive and collaborative environment
- Accommodating personal needs
- Encouraging coworkers to support each other
- Trust, camaraderie, and inclusion
- Feel valued
- Take responsibility
- Express ideas freely
- Integral team members
- Enhancing organizational health
- Authenticity and humility as foundations of spiritual leadership'
- Authenticity and humility as foundations
- Authenticity as key element
- Genuine connection
- Humility
- Focus on individual worth

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    - Acknowledging imperfections
    - Respected, valued, and loved
    - Belonging and purpose
    - Motivates individuals
    - Transforms followers to collaborators
    - Commitment to shared vision
    - Well-being of individuals and organization
- Leadership and communication codes:
    - Approach leadership with an open mind
    - Key components of my leadership style
    - Sense of belonging and significance
    - Humbly reach out to my team
    - Managed effectively
    - Built strong relationships with my team
    - Trust and support demonstrated
    - Solving challenges with team members
    - Enhance their skills and exceed expectations
    - Leading by example
    - Key components of my leadership style
    - Leadership growth
    - Recognition
- Faith and spirituality codes:
    - Praise God
    - Faith has played a crucial role
    - God called me
    - Dance ministry
    - Heard God clearly
    - Prayer and warmups
    - Organizational spirituality
    - God's presence
    - Faith challenged
    - Regained faith
    - Authenticity and humility as foundations of spiritual leadership
    - Authenticity and humility as foundations
    - Authenticity as key element
    - Genuine connection
    - Humility
    - Focus on individual worth
    - Acknowledging imperfections
    - Respected, valued, and loved
    - Belonging and purpose

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- Empowerment and inclusion codes:
  - Empowerment
  - Ownership and belonging
  - Community and family
  - Delegation and empowerment
  - Promoting diversity and inclusion
  - Investing in diversity and empowerment
  - Investing time, effort, and care
  - Diverse needs and strengths
  - Fostering delegation and empowerment
  - Supportive and collaborative environment
  - Accommodating personal needs
  - Encouraging coworkers to support each other
  - Trust, camaraderie, and inclusion
  - Feel valued
  - Take responsibility
  - Express ideas freely
  - Integral team members
- Diversity and collaboration codes:
  - Diverse workplaces
  - Diversity brings ideas
  - Unique cultures and perspectives
  - Fostering collaboration and creativity
  - Sharing knowledge
  - Exchanging perspectives
  - Organizational enrichment
- Continuous development and well-being codes:
  - Continuous self-development
  - Adapting to industry changes
  - Fostering team development
  - Well-being
  - Supportive environment
  - Forgiveness
  - Enhancing organizational health
  - Commitment to shared vision
  - Motivates individuals
  - Transforms followers to collaborators
  - Responsibility
  - Inclusion

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Discussion

Each RQ encompasses numerous codes that share overlapping ideas, including faith-based leadership, trust, empathy, inclusivity, communication, and well-being. These recurring themes indicate that core topics have been addressed repeatedly. The codes are highly detailed and comprehensive. For example, RQ1/IQ1 includes themes like servant leadership, compassionate leadership, supportive work environment, and spiritual guidance, all of which paint a nuanced picture of how spiritual leaders influence well-being. Similarly, RQ2/IQ2 highlights genuine interpersonal communication, open communication, and mutual respect, which tie into trust, creativity, and collaboration themes. RQ3/IQ3 expands on concepts such as diversity, empowerment, and delegation, emphasizing their contributions to organizational health and personal growth. The existing codes cover a broad and interconnected spectrum of the key principles outlined in the RQs. Many codes (e.g., trust, empathy, faith, collaborative environment) are relevant across multiple RQs. This overlap shows that the study has captured the interconnected nature of the explored phenomena.

Answer to RQ1

Spiritual leaders who prioritize listening to the Word of God are often regarded as exemplars of servant leadership, embodying qualities such as attentiveness, empathy, and respect for their followers. This foundation in spirituality fosters an environment that cultivates trust and compassion. Employees perceive spiritual leaders as empathetic figures who attentively address their concerns and offer customized support, fostering a sense of belonging and worth within the organization. The steadfast faith of leaders serves as a foundational principle, fostering humility in their actions and dedication to the development of others. Applying these principles within organizational settings enhances employee morale, fosters mutual respect, and promotes improved collaboration. Integrating spirituality into leadership practices fosters a tone of integrity, encouraging others to adopt similar values and thereby enhancing the organization's overall well-being. Empathy and flexibility reinforce these principles, enabling leaders to tackle challenges while empowering followers to overcome obstacles effectively.

The involvement of spiritual leaders with the Word of God greatly influences organizational settings, forming a core foundation for leadership practices. This idea is centered on the theme of *Divine Guidance as the Foundation of Spiritual Leadership*, emphasizing the importance for leaders to stay in tune with God's direction. Leaders who actively listen to God's Word align their actions with a higher purpose, fostering authenticity and humility as key qualities. Followers often see leaders as attentive and empathetic, creating an environment rooted in trust and respect. The leader's ability to empathize with and honor their followers demonstrates the principle of hearing the

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Word of God, which is shown by their consideration of team members' unique needs and contributions. Leaders guided by divine principles prioritize harmony and teamwork within their organizations, as highlighted in the theme of promoting empathy, respect, and cooperation through spiritual leadership. When leaders stay aligned with their spiritual calling, they make decisions that reflect the organization's and members' core values. Followers view these actions as meaningful, strengthening a sense of unity and shared purpose.

Answer to RQ2

Spiritual leaders who improve interpersonal communication are crucial for building trust and strengthening workplace relationships. Their ability to promote genuine dialogue, based on openness and humility, creates an environment of mutual respect and shared understanding. Followers see these leaders as communicators who focus on active listening and encourage collaboration. Spiritual leaders boost creativity and motivation by establishing open channels for exchanging ideas and feedback, fostering a shared sense of purpose. Employees view interpersonal communication as key for resolving conflicts, increasing engagement, and improving workplace satisfaction. These outcomes help create a cohesive organizational environment that promotes teamwork and deepens individuals' connection to their colleagues and the organization's mission. Leaders' interpersonal communication skills also enhance innovation by allowing followers to share their unique perspectives and skills in pursuit of organizational goals.

The benefits of each principle are most evident in how they affect interpersonal communication within organizations. Effective spiritual leaders focus on divine guidance and foster genuine communication, as illustrated by the theme of *Genuine Communication as the Bedrock of Spiritual Leadership*. This theme emphasizes how open and inclusive dialogue enables leaders to build trust, resolve conflicts, and encourage creativity among their followers. For example, spiritual leaders who promote collaborative decision-making make followers feel valued and heard, strengthening relationships and encouraging group unity. Additionally, the theme of *Interpersonal Communication as a Foundation for Trust, Creativity, and Morale* underscores the vital role of communication in creating a positive organizational culture. Leaders who support open dialogue promote mutual understanding and teamwork, helping teams overcome challenges together. This environment allows creativity to thrive, as team members feel confident sharing their ideas and contributions. Followers see this approach as a key sign of effective leadership, recognizing its ability to boost both individual and group motivation.

These principles provide practical benefits for organizations. The theme of *Building Trust through Holistic and Result-Driven Spiritual Leadership* shows that combining trust

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with a results-oriented approach boosts employee engagement and supports organizational success. Higher morale, productivity, and job satisfaction are often linked to the spiritual leader's commitment to fostering trust and respect. This highlights the strong influence of spiritual leadership on the well-being of organizations.

Answer to RQ3

Understanding the benefits of diversity, empowerment, and delegation: People see the investments made by spiritual leaders in diversity, empowerment, and delegation as vital for both personal growth and organizational success. Leaders who prioritize diversity recognize the unique strengths of their team members and offer equal development opportunities, fostering inclusivity. Delegation serves as a tool for empowering employees, helping them develop their skills, and encouraging meaningful contributions toward organizational goals. When employees are entrusted with responsibilities, they feel valued, which boosts their confidence and motivation to perform well. Delegation promotes empowerment, enhances problem-solving, and sparks innovation, strengthening the team's overall capabilities. The practices of spiritual leaders support organizational health by cultivating a culture of mutual respect and collaboration among diverse groups. Inclusive and empowering environments enhance employee well-being, resulting in increased productivity and overall success. Leaders' commitment to diversity and empowerment aligns with their principles of faith and humility, reinforcing a sense of purpose and fairness within the organization.

Diversity, empowerment, and delegation are vital principles for promoting well-being and organizational health, as seen in spiritual leaders who prioritize investing in their teams. The theme of empowerment and delegation as core elements for community development shows that giving meaningful responsibilities to team members enhances efficiency and builds a sense of ownership and belonging. When leaders delegate tasks fairly, followers feel their contributions are appreciated, which boosts morale and increases commitment to organizational goals. Investing in diversity is a key part of spiritual leadership, highlighted by the theme of *Investing in Diversity and Empowerment to Foster Collaborative Teams*. Leaders who recognize and value their followers' unique talents and perspectives create inclusive environments that encourage collaboration. Leaders who promote diversity demonstrate respect for individuality and strengthen organizational unity. Followers see this approach as empowering, viewing it as a driver for their personal growth and the organization's success.

The theme of *Trust and Respect as Drivers of Employee Motivation and Organizational Success* emphasizes the role of spiritual leaders in building trust through genuine concern and support for their teams. This trust forms the foundation for delegation and

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empowerment, enabling leaders to foster motivation and commitment among followers. When team members experience trust and respect, they are more likely to take initiative, share ideas, and contribute to the organization's overall success. This dynamic enhances individual well-being and cultivates a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. The benefits of these principles are clear in their positive impact on the organization's overall health. The theme of *Inclusive Communication and Morale Building for Organizational Growth* highlights how spiritual leaders use communication to create an environment of inclusivity and shared purpose. Leaders foster a sense of collective achievement by aligning organizational goals with the values and aspirations of its members. This approach strengthens organizational cohesion and boosts resilience in facing challenges.

Summary

Spiritual leadership represents a multifaceted framework that includes divine guidance, interpersonal communication, and a commitment to diversity, empowerment, and delegation. The principles evaluated through diverse themes demonstrate the transformative effects of spiritual leadership on individuals and organizations. Leaders prioritizing the Word of God align their actions with a greater purpose, promoting empathy, respect, and team collaboration. The focus on authentic communication fosters trust and creativity, allowing teams to navigate challenges and attain shared objectives. Moreover, investing in diversity and empowerment fosters inclusive environments that enhance individual value and motivation, thereby contributing to the organization's overall health and success. Spiritual leadership is a comprehensive framework that promotes well-being, unity, and organizational growth through its underlying principles and themes. Authentic and purpose-driven leadership has a profound impact on individuals and communities, motivating them to excel and reach their full potential.

Findings

The findings significantly improve the practitioner literature on spiritual leadership by offering practical insights for developing authentic, empathetic, and collaborative organizational settings. The contributions highlight the importance of engaging with the Word of God as a key aspect of leadership, showing how divine guidance motivates leaders to operate with integrity and humility. The results emphasize the need for leadership programs that focus on emotional intelligence, active listening, and spiritual inclusivity as essential strategies for creating environments where individuals feel valued, empowered, and connected (Sanders, 2007; Smith et al., 2018). Practitioners can apply these insights by aligning their leadership approaches with higher values, encouraging purpose-driven decision-making that deeply connects with teams and

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communities. This focus on spiritual principles reinforces the unique role of spiritual leaders in creating environments built on trust, respect, and collaboration.

The findings emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication as a key aspect of effective leadership. Spiritual leaders build trust and stimulate creativity within their teams by encouraging honest communication, which in turn increases motivation and morale (Vanover et al., 2021). This insight is especially valuable for practitioners aiming to create inclusive environments where individuals feel recognized and valued. As demonstrated by spiritual leaders, effective communication practices can be applied across different organizational settings to improve cohesion and productivity (Sanders, 2007). The findings also highlight the importance of investing in diversity, empowerment, and delegation. Spiritual leaders who acknowledge and leverage their teams' unique talents and perspectives foster collaborative environments (Smith et al., 2018). Delegation enhances efficiency and empowers team members, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging. This analysis offers practitioners strategies to build diverse, empowered teams that drive organizational success. Incorporating spiritual leadership principles, such as empathy, humility, and inclusivity, can boost individual well-being and organizational health. Overall, these findings contribute to the existing literature by presenting spiritual leadership as a transformative approach for achieving shared goals and supporting holistic development within modern organizations.

Weaknesses of the Study

Conducting comprehensive interviews and carefully analyzing the collected data using qualitative techniques, such as thematic analysis, requires a significant investment of time, energy, and attention to detail. This process involves fully engaging with the complexities of participants' narratives and carefully identifying patterns, themes, and underlying meanings that emerge from their accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The commitment to rigorous qualitative methods highlights the demanding nature of ensuring the research is thorough and meaningful. In phenomenological studies, validating the reliability and credibility of the findings presents unique challenges. Since phenomenology focuses on exploring and understanding individuals' lived experiences, these findings are inherently subjective and deeply connected to personal perspectives. Unlike data obtained from quantitative approaches, which can be verified through statistical or empirical measures, the outcomes of phenomenological research depend on the interpretation of human experiences, making the establishment of their accuracy and trustworthiness a nuanced and complex task (Moustakas, 1994).

Recommended Future Research

New studies on spiritual leadership should explore its long-term effects on organizations to gain a better understanding of how sustained spiritual leadership

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practices influence key success indicators, such as employee retention, creativity, efficiency, and overall workplace culture. Future research should expand the scope of spiritual leadership across different cultural contexts, focusing on various interpretations and applications of spirituality in international work environments. Cross-cultural studies could examine how spiritual leadership is perceived and practiced in multiple cultural settings, especially where spiritual values may interact differently with organizational norms and practices. Researchers might investigate the impact of cultural differences on employees' openness to spiritual leadership and how leaders navigate conflicts between individual spiritual values and collective cultural traditions. This research is crucial for multinational organizations seeking to foster inclusive environments that respect diverse spiritual and cultural perspectives.

Conclusion

This research provides a detailed, phenomenological examination of how spiritual leadership cultivates creativity, trust, and motivation through genuine interpersonal relationships and compassionate actions. Using in vivo coding, the study captures the lived experiences and voices of organizational members, highlighting the emotional richness and transformational effects of leadership grounded in empathy and spiritual principles. The results indicate that clear communication, kindness, and spiritual mindfulness, particularly through engagement with God's Word, are essential tools for promoting well-being, trust, and motivation in various workplace settings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005).

The findings underscore that spiritual leaders create emotionally supportive environments that connect individual flourishing with organizational health. Participants' firsthand narratives reflect how such leadership builds emotional bonds and enhances organizational performance, emphasizing the centrality of listening, emotional intelligence, and respectful engagement. Leadership programs that prioritize active listening, empathy, and spiritual inclusivity are instrumental in nurturing cultures where individuals feel genuinely valued and empowered.

By highlighting the intersection of spiritual values and leadership practices, this study demonstrates that spiritual leadership not only strengthens emotional connections but also drives organizational excellence. The conclusion invites future researchers to investigate the long-term organizational effects of spiritual leadership across global and culturally diverse contexts, examining its adaptability, sustainability, and role in fostering cross-cultural collaboration. The enduring relevance of spiritual leadership within contemporary structures affirms its potential as a transformative framework for leading with wisdom, compassion, and purpose.

About the Author

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Jeffrey McKinney is a decorated U.S. Army veteran with over 24 years of distinguished service, including five combat deployments in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. Renowned for his calm, decisive leadership, he led more than 100 Combat Logistical Patrols under high-risk conditions, earning the Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal, and numerous other commendations. His military legacy reflects courage, integrity, and operational excellence.

Following active duty, Jeffrey transitioned into entrepreneurship as an independent contractor with State Farm Mutual Insurance Companies, where he guides clients in risk management, financial planning, and retirement solutions. He remains deeply committed to service through church outreach and community engagement.

Jeffrey holds a B.S. in Homeland Security and an M.S. in Management with a focus on organizational leadership. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University, where his research explores ethical, adaptive, and complexity-based leadership. Integrating operational experience, academic rigor, and faith-informed values, Jeffrey is a trusted leader and emerging voice in both professional and community spheres.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Jeffrey McKinney, 4048 Hiddenwell Lane, Chester, VA 23831. Email: jeffmck@mail.regent.edu

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Leading Through Manufactured Tension: A Biblical Roadmap for Leadership Change and Renewal

Brandi Humphries
Regent University
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

This paper explores the application of "manufactured tension" as a strategic leadership framework for organizational transformation, drawing upon biblical narratives—particularly the leadership journey of Moses—and contemporary leadership theory. Using a case study of a construction-based organization facing cycles of ineffective leadership, fear-driven stagnation, and cultural misalignment, it examines how executive coaching served as a catalytic intervention for awakening awareness and driving change, illustrating how intentional disruption guided by servant leadership principles can challenge entrenched behaviors, foster courage, and generate momentum toward renewal. Grounded in biblical teachings and modern leadership scholarship, the paper introduces a five-phase model of transformation—Manufactured Tension, Confrontation with Courage, Vision Casting, Growth Through Uncertainty, and Entering the Promised Land—reflecting a progression from awareness to sustainability and emphasizing accountability, empowerment, and succession planning. Ultimately, it argues that when leadership aligns spiritual wisdom with practical coaching practices, organizations can break destructive cycles and move toward resilient, values-driven flourishing, underscoring the enduring relevance of biblical leadership principles in shaping adaptive, ethical, and sustainable organizational cultures.

Keywords: manufactured tension, biblical principles, leadership, coaching

For years, ineffective leadership and a repeating cycle of internal setbacks restricted the organization's ability to flourish. Recognizing the urgent need for change, ownership engaged in a season of executive coaching, both individually and collectively. What began as an investment in leadership development quickly became a pivotal turning point. Within the first year, the coaching process awakened a profound awareness among the ownership team; genuine transformation would require a bold shift in leadership.

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This moment of clarity generated intentional, "manufactured tension"—an energizing force that disrupted entrenched patterns and cultivated a renewed vision for the future. From this tension emerged a robust framework for organizational renewal, drawing inspiration from the biblical narrative of Moses—a timeless roadmap for navigating change, challenge, and ultimately toward a flourishing future.

This case illustrates the transformative potential of coaching, emphasizing both the necessity of leader readiness to engage in the process and the resulting organizational change that enables long-term flourishing. Moreover, it highlights the critical role of committed practitioners, researchers, and writers in capturing and disseminating these experiences, thereby advancing the collective understanding and practice of leadership development.

Overview: Navigating Leadership Transition and Renewal

The transition from master craftsman to business owner was an arduous one. As a master craftsman in the construction industry, the owner demonstrated numerous qualities that contributed to his exceptional success. While many skills were transferable to his role as a business owner, he was less proficient in several leadership-related competencies.

Regardless, because he refused to fail, the owner sacrificed everything necessary to become successful. With no formal business-related education, he learned every lesson imaginable the hard way, yet he persevered. Nineteen years into business ownership, the owner finds himself ready to focus on his family. Now a successful owner of multiple organizations, he is prepared to withdraw from the day-to-day, hands-on tasks of business ownership. He has worked diligently to establish trusted relationships with experts, employees, and a deep pool of repeat clients.

Due to the proven benefits of certified teams and executive coaches, a plan was implemented to retain existing talent and facilitate their personal and professional growth and development, ultimately aiming for a successful transition from the owner to the operations manager. This plan takes time. Not days, weeks, or even a month or two. This will require a multi-phased approach, assuming the parties are as willing to participate as I hope. While bringing out the best in each other and the organization requires diligent effort and extreme awareness, there will be hesitation, pushback, and reluctance to invest the time and effort required. Those will likely slow down the process, yet that is to be expected. Change is difficult, at the least. Personal reflection and intentional interpersonal change are even more challenging.

Many profound figures in the Bible exemplify Christlike character traits that could serve as the basis for this framework. Examples of such figures are Joseph (son of David), Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther, Samual, Moses, and countless others. Among these,

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the life of Moses exemplifies the attributes of effective leadership and serves as a paradigm for executive leadership in both theological and organizational contexts. His leadership was not self-appointed but divinely initiated, emerging from a sense of vocation rather than ambition or the pursuit of power. Throughout his tenure, Moses demonstrated crisis leadership, collaborative governance, and intentional succession planning. His encounter with God at the burning bush represents a defining moment of divine commissioning, signifying a transformational alignment between personal purpose and divine mandate. Confronting Pharaoh required moral courage and visionary conviction, qualities consistent with contemporary understandings of transformational and servant leadership (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977). Moreover, Moses balanced authority with humility, exemplifying leadership as service to both God and community (Spears, 2010). His mentorship of Joshua reflects a deliberate strategy for leadership continuity, emphasizing stewardship, empowerment, and the preparation of future leaders (New International Version, 1978/2011, Deuteronomy 31:1–8). Collectively, these elements situate Moses as an enduring model of faith-driven, ethical leadership whose principles remain relevant to modern executive and organizational practice.

The life of Moses has been the focus of much scholarly research. Moses's refusal to compromise in his ordained leadership role and his overwhelming mercy validated his position as a trusted leader (Van Rensburg & Nicolaides, 2015). Moses exhibited behavioral traits of a servant leader and held to a concise sense of mission (Lee, 2020). Moses was faithfully devoted and obedient to the Lord (Sampayo & Graham, 2015). His unwavering commitment to the people and his pursuit of their spiritual maturity exemplify authentic servant leadership (Friedman & Krausz, 2025). Moses consistently used God as a moral compass to ensure he was always headed in the right direction (Serrano, 2020). Collectively, these attributes underscore Moses as a timeless exemplar of servant leadership whose influence continues to shape leadership thought today.

The process of transformation mirrors the leadership journey of Moses, reflecting a developmental progression from divine awareness to enduring sustainability. Transformation begins with awareness, exemplified in Moses's encounter with God at the burning bush, where self-realization and divine calling intersect (Exodus 3:1–12). It requires courage, as demonstrated in the crossing of the Red Sea, where faith, decisiveness, and moral conviction converge in the face of existential challenge (Exodus14:13–31). Transformation further entails articulating a vision, as exemplified by Moses's guidance of the Israelites toward the Promised Land—a metaphor for aspirational leadership rooted in hope and perseverance. This journey also underscores the importance of shared leadership. Through his empowerment of Joshua and the elders, Moses models distributive authority and trust, aligning with principles of servant and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977; Northouse, 2022). Finally, sustainability emerges in Deuteronomy, where Moses codifies enduring

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ethical and communal principles, establishing a foundation for continuity beyond his lifetime. Collectively, these elements affirm that authentic transformation, whether spiritual or organizational, requires awareness, courage, vision, empowerment, and intentional succession planning to ensure lasting impact (Wright, 2010).

Problem Statement

My organization has wrestled with leadership challenges. Cycles of poor communication, unclear direction, and misalignment have limited our ability to flourish. Our leadership is outdated, authoritarian, and disconnected. Our people feel stuck, undervalued, and burned out. Our innovation has stalled, and our culture is characterized by fear, control, and a focus on maintaining the status quo.

Fear suppresses learning, risk-taking, and innovation. A fear-based company culture locks organizations into decline. Fear-based inaction is evident throughout the Bible. In Numbers 13 and 14, Israel refused to enter the Promised Land, and fear led to 40 years of wandering. In 1 Samual 15, Saul's failure to act decisively cost him his kingdom. While dozens of examples can be found throughout the Bible, additional examples of fear-based inaction can be seen in Matthew 25:24–25, Jeremiah 1:6–8, Judges 6:14–15, Numbers 13:31–33, and Exodus 4:10–13.

Ultimately, fear-driven indecision traps organizations in cycles of decline. If a struggling, declining organization is led by a team paralyzed by fear of "what-ifs," it is likely doomed to repeat painful, destructive cycles. The business is caught in a repeating cycle—reacting instead of leading, fixing symptoms instead of addressing causes, and returning to the same behaviors that created the problems in the first place. These patterns are no longer just frustrating; they are destructive. Every delay in making necessary changes deepens inefficiency, erodes morale, and weakens our competitive position. If we do not disrupt these cycles now, the organization will not simply stagnate—it will decline. The cost of staying the same has become greater than the cost of change. Our future depends on our willingness to confront reality, make different decisions, and move forward with urgency and clarity.

Proposed Solution

Repeating the painful cycles was no longer an option for my organization, but where do we begin to unravel the chaos of the vicious cycles? Executive coaching was the miracle that started to change the trajectory of our leadership team and organization. The weekly individual and team coaching sessions helped us identify patterns we had not previously recognized. Additionally, our coach utilized assessments to help identify specific traits and behaviors that could be leveraged productively.

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Our executive coach created a sense of awakening. With the owners' eyes wide open, it became clear that drastic leadership change was needed. Locating inspiration for next steps and affirming examples of successful leadership transformation was overwhelming. Just search Google for organizational leadership books, and you will get tens of thousands of titles. One, however, stands out among the other.

Biblical Guidance

Leadership in modern organizations is often challenged by cycles of ineffective management and resistance to change. The Bible, one of history's most enduring sources of wisdom, offers valuable insights that transcend time and provide practical guidance for leaders today.

For centuries, the Bible has served as a guide for moral, spiritual, and leadership principles. Far from being limited to religious contexts, its teachings speak to universal human experiences of trust, responsibility, and transformation. In the workplace, where leadership is often tested by crisis, uncertainty, and organizational stagnation, Biblical wisdom provides a roadmap for navigating change and cultivating resilience. This framework includes key lessons from biblical leaders and stories that are profoundly relevant to CEOs, executives, and organizational leaders today.

Jesus was a prime example, exhibiting servant leadership behavior that inspired loyalty and fostered a healthy culture. Nehemiah had clarity of purpose that drove perseverance and success. Solomon demonstrated discernment that led to sustainable and just decisions. Paul and Timothy were great examples of succession planning, ensuring continuity and growth. Key biblical leadership lessons from the Bible are actionable behaviors for modern organizational leaders.

When leaders avoid hard decisions, organizations fall into a repetitive cycle. Fear drives hesitation, and hesitation drives missed opportunities. Breaking free requires intentional disruption. Another way to view the painful cycles is that the fear of change leads to inaction, and inaction results in repeated setbacks, which ultimately lead to the organization's decline. The opposite of fear is courage. Courage to lead creates manufactured tension. Manufactured tension leads to transformation and, ultimately, a flourishing future.

Phase I: Manufactured Tension

Just like the plagues created discomfort in Egypt, sometimes disruption is necessary to awaken a stagnant system. In a modern organization, this may manifest as market disruption, financial losses, quality control issues, lawsuits, or high employee turnover. This tension exposes dysfunction. It creates urgency that the old system cannot ignore.

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Phase I of this framework entails specific actions: listening to employees and stakeholders, identifying patterns of dysfunction, and creating safe spaces for truth-telling. Manufactured tension is intentional. It is a strategic disruption that pushes growth. It is not chaos but rather purposeful discomfort. It encourages innovation and new thinking.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they soon found themselves positioned between the Red Sea before them and Pharaoh's advancing army behind them. This moment of pressure was not incidental; it was divinely orchestrated. The tension was purposeful—intended to cultivate deeper trust, strengthen obedience, and shape the people's identity as they transitioned from bondage to nationhood.

My organization was thrust into manufactured tension by the owner. The awakening that resulted from the coaching initiative created an intense urgency for drastic change. The owner began making subtle changes that jolted specific employees into an uncomfortable position, one that made them question their level of care and concern when making decisions and whether they were capable of becoming more significant contributors for the organization's sake.

Phase II: Confront With Courage

Without tension, organizations get complacent. Healthy tension fuels urgency and transformation. Manufactured tension refers to situations where conflict or urgency is intentionally created or heightened to provoke a decision, transformation, or action.

In the context of the Bible, this is evident when God, leaders, or prophets introduce tension to shift people out of their comfort zones and into obedience, growth, or repentance. These moments of stress are not accidental; they are divinely or prophetically designed to catalyze transformation, reveal truth, and draw people toward a deeper faith. In modern organizations, manufactured tension exposes broken leadership practices, promotes accountability, and disrupts the status quo, prompting change.

One of the most striking displays of Moses's courage came when he stood before Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler of his time. Moses had no army behind him, no political authority to enforce his message, and no influence in Egypt's court. Nevertheless, he was commanded to deliver a direct challenge to Pharaoh's power.

This moment shows that courage in leadership is not rooted in position or advantage, but rather in conviction. Authentic leadership is revealed when you stand firm in what is right, even when the odds are stacked against you. It is the ability to speak clearly and act decisively when the outcome is uncertain and the pressure is high.

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Examples of manufactured tension in an organization might include rotating leaders into roles outside their comfort zone to challenge their assumptions, deliberately limiting the budget or time for a new project to force teams to think creatively and prioritize essentials, or making performance data visible at all levels, even when it reveals underperformance.

My organization's owner initially felt the need to either relocate or terminate the existing operations manager in order to clear the way for a fresh, experienced, and servant-hearted professional. The courage to consider such a drastic change, given the employee's lengthy tenure, was tremendous. The risk of a catastrophic fallout that could extend beyond the employees created a substantial risk; yet, amid the worries, the owner persevered. Subsequently, multiple meetings were held to announce that the organization was prepared to downsize to become more efficient and healthier. The decision was not simply cutting staff to reduce cost; it was a strategic realignment of the organization around the work that truly matters, with the employees who genuinely care.

Phase III: Cast a God-Rooted Vision

The benefit of manufactured tension is that transformation can begin. Old habits die hard, and when team members become uncomfortable, they often seek guidance out of vulnerability. Much like the tabernacle in Exodus was inspired by the Spirit, the organization begins to build with intentionality, tenacity, and a focus on serving others.

In modern organizations, casting a God-rooted vision may involve organizational redesign, redistributed leadership, and value-based hiring. It may also include adopting new collaborative platforms, rediscovering its why, and rebranding itself around its vision and values.

After leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses knew that freedom alone was not enough—they needed a new identity. At Mount Sinai, Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, seeking direction for a people who had only known life as slaves. There, God gave Moses a vision of what the nation was meant to become. Moses came down and shared that calling, not as a set of rules, but as a new identity to live into. In that moment, Moses did not just lead the people out of something—he led them into something. He cast a vision rooted in purpose, dignity, and a future shaped by God, helping them understand that their story was beginning.

While my organization is secular, the premise of a God-rooted vision was easy to visualize. Once the decision was made to pause the removal or relocation of key personnel, a specific coaching initiative was launched to ensure urgent changes were made and ultimately identify those unwilling to make the necessary adjustments to ensure the organization's success. While biblical principles guide my behavior, I can

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apply them to my secular organization by seizing every opportunity to lead as Jesus did—as a servant with purpose, compassion, empathy, and full reliance on the Holy Spirit. The organization is beginning to see the value of empowering its people, acting in humble service, and using clear communication by applying a be-curious-first approach.

Phase IV: Growth Through Uncertainty

With momentum on the rise and spirits buoyed by shifts within the organization, the next phase of the framework involves enhancing trust and fostering deep collaboration. Key leadership members forge the path ahead by demonstrating servant leadership.

When an organization applies servant leadership during periods of uncertainty, the emphasis is on empowering and supporting people rather than focusing solely on profit or control. Servant leadership encourages leaders to prioritize the growth and well-being of their employees and stakeholders, fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and empathy. This approach can be efficient in navigating uncertainty, as it encourages resilience, adaptability, and a sense of purpose within the team.

Mutual accountability, while equipping employees for spiritual and cultural growth, is a powerful concept that aligns deeply with the principles of servant leadership. They foster a sense of shared responsibility, development, and alignment within an organization.

Mutual accountability goes beyond traditional top-down management. It fosters a culture where both leaders and employees hold each other accountable for their actions, outcomes, and the organization's overall success.

Spiritual and cultural growth is not limited to religion or ethnicity—it encompasses fostering personal growth, ethical development, and cultural awareness that aligns with the organization's values and purpose. By nurturing this growth, organizations cultivate a sense of meaning, belonging, and alignment with the mission, thereby strengthening commitment and promoting long-term success.

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites entered the wilderness, where uncertainty was high, and resources were limited. The people often complained about food, water, direction, discomfort, and the fear of what they did not know, and they wished they could return to Egypt simply because it felt familiar. In those early moments, Moses attempted to handle everything alone, bearing the emotional weight, making decisions, and enduring the constant pressure of leading a people still learning to live freely. When the burden became too heavy, Moses brought his frustration and exhaustion to God, choosing to rely on God's guidance and strength rather than carrying the load by himself.

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While I do not start my day without consulting the Lord, not everyone in my organization shares my faith. Although I face uncertainty each day, I have learned to recognize what God has placed in my control and what He has not. Similarly, key personnel in my organization do not yet have a roadmap, yet continue to trust leadership and place confidence in what they cannot see. While we have not yet established a new organizational chart with defined roles and responsibilities, the staff is aware that changes are underway, including personal adjustments they must consider and begin addressing. Their faith in the owner is being fueled by the changes they see in his and other key leadership behaviors.

Phase V: Entering the Promised Land

The fundamentals of the framework can be appreciated by considering the transitions from tension to growth, from vision to direction, from courage to breakthroughs, and from a culture of servant leadership that allows the staff to flourish.

The final phase of the framework involves establishing new rhythms and systems. Encouraged hearts create renewed, inspired drive and determination. Fundamentally, whether an organization is faith-based or secular, this phase focuses on designing systems that reflect Kingdom values, encouraging intentional innovation, and building sustainable infrastructure.

Faithful trust in the process, even when we cannot see it, is to be celebrated. Moses's last central act as a leader was preparing Joshua to take over and lead the people into the Promised Land. It is an excellent example of healthy succession planning. Moses understood that the mission was bigger than him, and he did not need to be the one who finished every part of it. He spent time investing in Joshua—bringing him into decisions, letting him see the challenges and the wins, and helping him grow into leadership. When it was time to hand things off, Moses did not hold on to control. He publicly affirmed Joshua, encouraged the people to trust him, and supported a future he knew he would not personally see. Moses's leadership reminds us that a real legacy is not just about what you accomplish yourself—it is about how well things continue after you.

While my organization has yet to enter the Promised Land, we are fueled by manufactured tension that continues to drive positive organizational change. Our administrative and field staff are gradually adopting a cultural shift toward a growth mindset, which is positively impacting the bottom line. With fewer safety and quality issues, we are winning productive work. We are releasing employees who are not adapting or are unwilling to make the necessary changes so the organization can shift course. I am not sure a healthy organization ever reaches the Promised Land. I am

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beginning to believe that the goal is to find contentment right on the cusp, within view of the sacred place we long to be.

Benefits of the Solution

Ultimately, values extend beyond written declarations in organizational manuals or symbolic displays within the workplace; they are embodied daily through interpersonal conduct, communal engagement, and adherence to a shared mission. Whether derived from Christian moral frameworks or broader humanistic traditions, values serve as foundational constructs that enable both individuals and organizations to flourish. When practiced consistently, reflective inquiry and relational authenticity foster environments in which individuals experience recognition, support, and motivation for personal and professional growth. By maintaining a principled commitment to these values, organizations fortify both their collective purpose and their ethical integrity, ensuring resilience amid shifting social and institutional contexts.

This solution harnesses lessons that every business can apply. From a broader perspective, there are too many key biblical principles to list. However, upon reviewing the solution, we observe similarities with highly successful leaders in the modern world. In his book, *Turn the Ship Around*, Marquet (2015) teaches that empowering others creates stronger organizations. He emphasizes the leader-leader model, which empowers decision-making and ownership at every level and breaks dependency cycles (Marquet, 2015). In *Stretch Not Snap* (Freytag, 2024), we are reminded that while every organization is different, achieving organizational cohesion and accountability requires more than articulating a compelling vision; it necessitates the intentional alignment of human energy toward a shared purpose.

Effective leaders recognize that the success of any enterprise depends on their ability to harness the inherent potential of human nature—its drive for meaning, belonging, and contribution—and channel it toward collective goals. When organizational systems, values, and leadership behaviors align with these intrinsic motivators, individuals not only perform more effectively but also experience deeper engagement and greater commitment to the organizational mission. Aligning human energy becomes both a strategic and ethical imperative for sustainable organizational growth and transformation.

Implementation Recommendations

Organizations cannot just will changes to occur. A sound plan, using a multi-phased approach, while ensuring the organization is ready for change, is imperative. Preparation is necessary to ensure the organization can meet the challenges it will face during implementation.

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My first consideration was the need to adapt the vocabulary. By that, I mean that while I am rooted in biblical teachings, I have an obligation to modify my language to align with my organization's secular culture. Tracing our organization's values back to biblical principles is a straightforward discussion with my fellow believers. However, for others in my sphere of influence, it has required a shift in vocabulary for those with no faith affiliation or a different perspective.

Internal Coaching Opportunity

Foundational coaching competencies, such as establishing trust, fostering psychological safety, and exercising intentional curiosity, are essential elements of effective coaching practice. However, internal coaching introduces additional considerations that extend beyond these foundational skills. One critical competency involves integrating human resource management principles with human developmental frameworks, enabling alignment between organizational objectives and individual growth trajectories. Although internal coaching is often viewed as an informal process, its capacity for timely intervention and facilitation of constructive dialogue contributes significantly to organizational effectiveness. The internal coach's familiarity with colleagues, institutional structures, and cultural norms provides unique advantages, as both coach and employee share an understanding of the organization's mission, values, and strategic direction, often leading to shared experiences and greater relational trust (Humphries, 2025).

Tenured internal coaches possess substantial institutional knowledge and a deep understanding of the organization's historical and cultural context. This expertise enables the provision of insights grounded in evidence and organizational precedent, rather than reactive judgment. Furthermore, ongoing observation of employees within their work environments enables internal coaches to deliver immediate, contextually informed feedback that supports professional development and enhances overall organizational learning. Since I'm already on staff and serving as a resource for my organization, we've been able to capitalize on the benefits of internal coaching.

Integrating Biblical Principles

Within Christian theology, two foundational commandments guide human conduct: to love the Lord with one's entire being and to love others as oneself. These imperatives hold significant implications for leadership, particularly when leadership is understood as the capacity to influence and inspire others. In contemporary organizational contexts, such influence is often directed toward achieving professional objectives, including exceeding performance metrics, securing a competitive advantage, and fulfilling corporate goals. However, for leaders grounded in faith, these commandments invite a

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broader and more transcendent purpose: to contribute to the common good by integrating spiritual conviction with professional practice.

Serving my organization provides a unique opportunity to embody this integration by applying scriptural principles, particularly those emphasizing compassion, stewardship, and service. Faith-informed leaders can cultivate environments that promote both personal transformation and organizational flourishing. Aligning divine teachings with coaching competencies fosters authentic engagement, ethical leadership, and relational depth. Ultimately, the ability to lead while simultaneously guiding others through a coaching framework represents a profound expression of the two great commandments, allowing faith to manifest not only in belief but also in daily professional practice.

Call to Action

Scripture offers numerous references to the cyclical nature of life and divine order, reflecting God's sovereignty over time and human experience. Ecclesiastes reminds readers that "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to weep, and a time to laugh" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4). Such passages affirm both the enduring constancy of God's creation and the unwavering stability of divine truth across the changing seasons of life. Theologically, this rhythm reflects an existential trust in God's providence, suggesting that, as beings created in his divine image, individuals possess the spiritual capacity to endure and flourish through faith, love, and mutual support (Grenz, 2001; Moltmann, 1993).

The call is clear: lead with courage, serve daily, embrace healthy tension, and prepare successors. Lead as a servant by influencing through humility and service. Reject fear-driven inaction that traps organizations in cycles of decline and choose courage by guiding people toward flourishing.

Leaders must step boldly, for inaction ensures failure, but faithful leadership paves the way for lasting change. Disruption is not the end—it is the birthplace of reinvention. Manufactured tension, when managed effectively, breaks down oppression and awakens creative leadership. The trajectory of my organization reflects not a random sequence of external events, but the cumulative outcome of intentional decision-making grounded in values-based leadership. Through a sustained commitment to personal development, ethical growth, and the empowerment of employees—the very individuals who make organizational success attainable—this organization exemplifies the transformative potential of purpose-driven leadership in practice.

My organization was desperate for change. Thanks to a certified coach and an owner who was open-minded and willing to invest in leadership development, my organization is transforming in biblical proportions, based on timeless teachings.

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Leading our organization through manufactured tension, a change in leadership, and a roadmap rooted in biblical teachings is bold and deeply transformational. It requires spiritual courage, clarity of vision, and a strategic approach rooted in faithful leadership principles. The Bible's leadership lessons are practical and timeless. By leading with humility, courage, wisdom, and service, modern executives can break destructive cycles and guide their organizations toward enduring impact.

Leaders throughout the Bible demonstrated that effective leadership requires more than authority; it demands faith—faith in a vision for a greater future where everyone flourishes. Biblical lessons provide both practical strategies and enduring wisdom for navigating change and fostering environments where organizations and individuals thrive. Like Moses leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, our goal is to flourish. Together, we can embrace change and build a thriving future.

Conclusion

Scripture affirms that life unfolds in seasons—times of breaking, rebuilding, stretching, and renewal. Ecclesiastes reminds us that "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This rhythm is not merely poetic; it reflects the divine architecture of growth, underscoring that transformation is neither accidental nor linear. It is purposeful, sacred, and often uncomfortable. For organizations trapped in cycles of fear, stagnation, and outdated leadership paradigms, this truth offers both a warning and an invitation: remain unchanged and risk decay or embrace tension and step courageously into renewal.

The journey of my organization demonstrates that manufactured tension, when guided by values, faith, and intentional leadership, can become a catalyst for rebirth. What once seemed like disruption revealed itself as divine orchestration—a necessary pressure that awakened awareness, challenged complacency, and birthed a renewed vision. Through executive coaching, the courage to confront deeply rooted patterns, and a framework grounded in biblical wisdom, our leadership moved from control to service, from fear to faith, and from survival to sustainable flourishing.

This transformation was not the result of circumstance, but of choice. It emerged through deliberate decisions to live our values, invest in our people, and lead with humility, courage, and conviction. Our experience affirms that effective leadership is not defined by authority alone, but by the willingness to surrender ego, embrace growth, and prepare others to carry the vision forward. Like Moses, we learned that true legacy is not found in how firmly one holds control, but in how faithfully one equips others to thrive beyond their presence.

The call to action is unmistakable. Leaders must reject fear-driven inertia and step boldly into courageous leadership. They must embrace healthy tension, foster servant-

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minded cultures, and commit to intentional succession planning. Organizations cannot afford to remain anchored in outdated systems and unexamined behaviors when their future demands adaptability, authenticity, and moral clarity.

Manufactured tension is not the enemy of progress; it is its birthplace. When stewarded with wisdom, it becomes the crucible through which renewed purpose, clarity, and transformation emerge. As demonstrated through this case, leadership grounded in biblical principles and lived with integrity has the power to disrupt destructive cycles and guide organizations toward enduring impact.

Like Moses leading the Israelites toward the Promised Land, the true aim is not perfection but faithful progression, and not arrival but alignment. It is within the tension, the refining, and the obedience to purpose that organizations discover their truest strength. And it is there, on the cusp of possibility, that leaders are called to rise, not simply to manage change, but to shepherd it with courage, compassion, and unwavering vision.

About the Author

Brandi Humphries is an accomplished human resources leader with more than 20 years of experience driving organizational excellence and people development. A Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP), she is known for her ability to inspire servant leadership and foster growth through empowering, values-based conversations.

Brandi currently serves within the construction industry, where she champions cross-cultural leadership and provides meaningful support to both field craftsmen and administrative teams. She holds a Master of Business Administration and a Doctor of Strategic Leadership, reflecting her commitment to continuous learning and transformative leadership.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: www.linkedin.com/in/brandi-humphries. Email: bhumphries1208@gmail.com

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Beyond the Role: First Lady Syndrome and Coaching as a Pathway to Flourishing

Cherelle Johnson
Regent University
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

This paper introduces *First Lady Syndrome* (FLS) as a conceptual framework for understanding the complex, often invisible leadership role of pastors' wives in Christian church settings. Though lacking formal authority or ordination, pastors' wives are frequently expected to serve as emotional anchors, spiritual caregivers, and public representatives of church leadership. Drawing on the concept of othermothering, this analysis identifies four interrelated constructs that combine to create a distinct and often burdensome role identity: role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. By naming these dynamics, FLS provides scholars, practitioners, and church leaders with a diagnostic lens to recognize the systemic and relational pressures pastors' wives face. Coaching is proposed as a strategic intervention that directly addresses these constructs by supporting boundary setting in ambiguous roles, fostering resilience against emotional strain, surfacing and validating invisible labor, and promoting authenticity in the face of image management. Integrating insights from coaching research on women leaders, this paper argues that coaching offers pastors' wives a structured, peer-based partnership that enhances self-awareness, strengthens confidence, and builds sustainable leadership capacity. FLS advances scholarship by formalizing a previously unnamed phenomenon, while coaching offers a practical pathway for flourishing. Together, they provide a framework for understanding and an evidence-based tool for supporting the well-being and leadership impact of pastors' wives within the wider ministry ecosystem.

Keywords: pastor's wife, othermothering, First Lady Syndrome, coaching, women in leadership, flourishing

In many Christian churches, the senior pastor's wife occupies a complex and often paradoxical position. Although she may hold no formal leadership title, she is deeply embedded in the life of the congregation, frequently serving as an informal counselor, mediator, and spiritual guide. Her role parallels that of political First Ladies, who are

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expected to maintain a visible, emotionally engaged presence while exercising little to no official authority.

Pastors' wives, also referred to as clergy wives, are often subject to unrealistic expectations from their congregations. They are held to elevated standards of behavior, spirituality, and service, leading many to experience what scholars describe as socially prescribed perfectionism, the internalized pressure to meet others' expectations at the cost of personal well-being (Kum, 2015; Lin & Wang, 2024). Lin and Wang's (2024) study found that perceived judgment from congregants was significantly associated with increased depression, burnout, and loneliness among clergy wives. Notably, even in cases where high expectations were not accompanied by overt judgment, negative psychological outcomes persisted, suggesting that the role itself carries inherent emotional strain.

The emerging focus on coaching female leaders addresses the distinct challenges women encounter in leadership positions, including gender bias, work-life balance, and confidence issues (Green et al., 2021). This coaching framework creates a supportive environment where female leaders can refine their leadership styles, enhance their skills, and effectively manage the complexities inherent in their roles. Such empowerment through coaching is instrumental in fostering greater gender diversity and inclusion within leadership structures (Moin et al., 2023).

This article addresses a persistent gap in leadership and ministry literature: the systemic role ambiguity and chronic underrecognition of pastors' wives within church structures. Pastors' wives are often elevated as visible symbols of spiritual and moral authority while they are simultaneously excluded from formal leadership structures. This symbolic recognition, absent institutional support, produces a paradox of high expectation coupled with structural marginalization (Soothill, 2010).

To address this gap, the article serves two purposes. First, it introduces the term *First Lady Syndrome (FLS)* to describe the recurring patterns of expectations, behaviors, and social dynamics that shape the lived experience of pastors' wives. This concept names the tension of being revered in title yet restricted in agency, often serving as spiritual othermothers whose essential contributions remain undervalued. Second, the article advocates coaching as a developmental and restorative tool uniquely suited to foster flourishing among pastors' wives. By equipping them with space for reflection, growth, and support, coaching offers a pathway for resilience, identity clarity, and sustainable leadership impact within their congregational contexts.

Toward a Comprehensive Framework

Although the experiences of pastors' wives have been explored across religious, sociological, and gender studies literature, the FLS phenomenon remains minimally

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examined within theory as a comprehensive framework. Soothill (2010) explicitly uses the term, *First Lady*, in reference to women in charismatic churches. Her work highlights the tension between the prestige afforded to pastors' wives and their lack of formal power, as well as the burdens of constant visibility, spiritual performance, and social polish. Soothill also calls for further inquiry into how the social and spiritual aspects of women's experiences interact within charismatic Christianity, pointing to a broader need for frameworks that capture this complexity.

Similarly, Bowler's (2019) *The Preacher's Wife* closely aligns with this concept of FLS, though the term itself is not used. Her examination of evangelical pastors' wives, especially in the context of megachurches and televangelism, reveals patterns of symbolic authority without decision-making power, along with significant image maintenance and emotional labor. Bowler's work focuses on the dynamics of celebrity culture within ministry, yet the emotional and performative expectations she identifies resonate directly with the core elements of this study's framework.

Koenig and Langford (1998) also contribute to the field by documenting the unpaid, emotionally demanding, and underrecognized work expected of pastors' wives. Likewise, Chavez's (2021) dissertation on Assemblies of God pastors addresses themes of burnout, invisible labor, and spiritual expectation among clergy spouses. While highly relevant, these studies tend to address such issues in isolation or without a unifying conceptual model. Chavez also calls for more research into the distinct emotional and relational demands placed on clergy families, emphasizing the need for practical ministry models that address clergy spouses well-being.

The current study builds on this foundation but addresses a clear gap: although previous research touches on various dimensions of the pastors' wives' role, such as emotional labor, role ambiguity, or image management, few, if any, synthesize these elements into a single diagnostic framework. FLS uniquely integrates four interrelated dimensions: role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. This holistic lens provides greater analytical depth, allowing both scholars and practitioners to assess the pastor's wife's experience not as a collection of isolated stressors, but as a complex, systemic role embedded in gendered and spiritual expectations.

While Soothill (2010) makes a symbolic comparison between pastors' wives and political First Ladies, this study expands that idea into a functional framework that diagnoses the consequences, identifies institutional symptoms, and offers implications for leadership development and pastoral care. In doing so, FLS bridges theoretical insight with practical relevance, offering a tool for researchers, ministry professionals, and educators alike to understand and respond to the unique pressures placed on women in this often-invisible role.

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FLS is introduced as a scholarly framework that captures their experience across emotional, symbolic, gendered, and institutional dimensions. It not only names the role but diagnoses its complexities. Grounded in the concept of othermothering, this analysis connects theory to the lived realities of pastors' wives. It aims to help them better understand how their informal influence shapes church governance and community life, despite lacking formal authority. This paper outlines and defines the FLS concept and core features, and discusses its broader implications with coaching. It fills a gap in leadership literature by addressing a role often overlooked but deeply impactful and suggesting coaching as sustainable leader development intervention for flourishing.

What is First Lady Syndrome?

Just as the role of a First Lady lacks constitutional clarity, the Bible does not explicitly define the role of a pastor's wife. Traditionally, a clergy wife is seen as the supportive partner of a pastor, minister, or religious leader. This role is often understood as part of a two-person career. The pastor's wife is expected to serve in emotional, social, spiritual, and leadership capacities within the church, yet is frequently viewed as an extension of her husband's ministry rather than an individual. This can create identity challenges, blurred expectations, and strain on her well-being (Lin & Wang, 2024).

The term First Lady was originally used in 1677 to describe the wife of a national leader and has since evolved (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it as the spouse of a chief executive, while Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) describe the modern First Lady as a rhetorical figure who uses public voice and symbolic leadership to influence politics and promote social causes. In recent decades, First Ladies have shifted from private supporters to public advocates, engaging in policy reform, philanthropy, and gender equity initiatives. Their leadership often reflects their personal background, shaping their advocacy and public roles (Amupanda, 2021).

Amupanda (2021) also notes that the role of First Ladies is marked by a lack of formal authority, despite heavy public scrutiny and expectations. This mirrors the experience of pastors' wives, who may not hold formal church titles but carry significant emotional and spiritual labor. They counsel congregants, manage behind-the-scenes ministry work, and maintain a polished public image. This is often completed without acknowledgment or institutional support (Kum, 2015). Though not politically influential like First Ladies, pastors' wives face similar pressures around visibility, morality, and performance (Crawford, 2007; Nancarrow, 2015). Their role is shaped by expectation, not formal definition, leaving them to navigate emotional exhaustion, role ambiguity, and the complex intersection of family, faith, and leadership, often without clear boundaries or support systems.

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Both First Ladies and pastors' wives navigate intense public expectations, scrutiny, and leadership challenges, but in different spheres. First Ladies operate in political and economic arenas, while pastors' wives function within spiritual and community-based contexts. Despite these differences, both roles carry similar pressures and highlight the need for structured support systems to sustain their well-being and leadership.

Historically, the term First Lady was also coined by enslaved African Americans as an honorary title for the preacher's wife, symbolizing her importance and the dignity of the couple's leadership within the church. For the enslaved, the church was one of the few spaces where they could express themselves freely and reclaim a sense of respect and humanity.

This convergence of political and religious leadership roles helps shape this contemporary concept of FLS. While the term is more commonly referenced in political literature, it remains underexplored in leadership and religious studies, lacking a solid theoretical foundation. FLS, as defined here, refers to the experience of a pastor's wife who contends with role ambiguity, emotional and invisible labor, and public image management. This concept aims to deepen awareness of the complex and often overlooked identity of pastors' wives.

Key Characteristics of First Lady Syndrome

The four distinctives that define the lived experience of many pastors' wives are role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. These interconnected themes highlight how pastors' wives navigate complex, often contradictory expectations in both personal and public spheres. Drawing from sociology, gender theory, and leadership studies, each concept reveals how individual experiences of stress, identity conflict, and emotional strain are rooted in broader institutional and structural dynamics. Together, these dimensions offer a deeper, multilayered understanding of FLS as a personal and systemic phenomenon.

Role Ambiguity

Pastors' wives often serve in spiritual advisory roles without formal ordination or official leadership titles, creating significant role ambiguity. This lack of clarity around expectations, responsibilities, and authority can lead to stress, disengagement, and organizational tension (Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2017; Gupta & Shaheen, 2017). For women, role ambiguity is often intensified by the clash between traditional gender norms and leadership expectations. Eagly and Karau (2002) highlight two core issues. First, women are often seen as less suited for leadership because stereotypically feminine traits are perceived to conflict with dominant leadership qualities. Second, women who do assume leadership roles often face backlash for violating gender norms.

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For pastors' wives, this ambiguity is further complicated by intersectionality because they are not only women, but also spouses and informal spiritual leaders, navigating overlapping identities that bring conflicting expectations (Cho et al., 2013). Their role exists in a liminal space—not quite clergy, not quite laity—making their influence both powerful and undefined. This can disrupt formal church hierarchies and leave pastors' wives excluded from leadership development pathways, leading to underutilization or misalignment of their potential within religious institutions.

Emotional Labor

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor, defining it as the process of managing one's emotions to meet the emotional demands of a job. This often involves surface acting, displaying emotions that aren't genuinely felt, or deep acting, where individuals try to internally align their feelings with what is expected. Unlike personal emotional expression, emotional labor is commodified; it becomes part of the job itself, particularly in caregiving or service roles (Brook, 2009).

Hochschild (1983) warns that prolonged emotional labor can lead to emotional dissonance. This is a disconnect between one's authentic self and the emotions they are expected to perform, ultimately causing alienation and burnout. This is particularly relevant for pastors' wives. Many report feeling isolated, unable to openly share personal struggles, and often lacking the support systems available to their clergy husbands (Lin & Wang, 2024).

Pastors' wives are frequently expected to maintain a joyful, nurturing presence even during personal grief or frustration. They may suppress disappointment with church leadership or hide emotional fatigue in order to offer care and stability to others (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018). Yet, this labor is deeply emotional, spiritually taxing, and essential to church functioning and is typically unpaid, unacknowledged, and carried out without formal authority. It mirrors the kind of invisible emotional labor Hochschild (1983) described: performed not for personal fulfillment, but to meet the expectations of a community, often at the cost of the caregiver's own well-being.

Invisible Labor

Kinman et al. (2011) identify emotional labor as a core part of clergy work, contributing significantly to what is known as invisible labor: work that is essential yet unrecognized, uncompensated, or excluded from formal job descriptions. Wichroski et al. (1994) expand this definition to include emotional, physical, intellectual, and social tasks that are often gendered and expected, yet left unacknowledged within organizational structures. They argue that the absence of language and frameworks to define much of women's work reinforces its invisibility.

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Gender plays a central role in this dynamic. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe how behaviors like nurturing, attentiveness, and emotional support are seen not as tasks women do, but as traits women are. This naturalization blurs the line between identity and labor, making it easier to overlook the real effort involved—even in professional settings. As Wichroski et al. (1994) explain, invisible work often originates in domestic life but becomes institutionalized in formal roles without recognition or structural support.

The experience of pastors' wives exemplifies this. Their unpaid contributions such as hosting, caregiving, event planning, and emotional support are crucial to church life yet fall outside formal roles. Often without titles, training, or choice, they are expected to fill in the gaps wherever needed. Luedtke and Sneed (2018) note that in smaller churches, where resources are scarce, this burden increases, pushing pastors' wives into all-encompassing, undefined roles.

Invisible labor is not just a personal issue; it is a structural and gendered problem embedded in church leadership culture. In the context of FLS, it fuels burnout, role confusion, and systemic inequality. Naming this labor is a necessary step toward recognizing its value and creating more equitable, sustainable church communities.

Image Management

Image management is the intentional or unintentional shaping of a public persona to meet social norms or personal goals. Leary and Kowalski (1990) define *impression management* as the broader strategy of controlling how one is perceived. *Self-presentation* is a specific type of impression management focused on shaping perceptions of the self (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; McKillop et al., 1992).

In the context of FLS, image management highlights the psychological and social pressure pastors' wives face to maintain an idealized public image. They're expected to embody moral perfection, similar to how othermothers are held up as role models for the community. The demand to be the "model Christian woman" can lead to emotional strain and internal identity conflict.

According to McKillop et al. (1992), many pastors' wives would likely score high in social identity measures because their identity is often shaped by public expectations. Their research shows that people in public-facing roles are especially vulnerable to internalizing the image they project. Over time, even performative self-presentations, such as always appearing strong, supportive, or joyful, can reshape private self-beliefs. A pastor's wife may eventually become the role she's been performing, whether consciously or not. Meanwhile, negative emotions or personal struggles are often suppressed, since admitting them would clash with the image being upheld. This

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disconnect creates cognitive dissonance between one's authentic self and the persona being presented.

Luedtke and Sneed (2018) further examine how clergy wives manage the pressure to meet both congregational and cultural expectations. Their study reveals that many pastors' wives adjust their behavior and appearance to maintain a flawless public image, often at the expense of authenticity. Participants described feeling constantly "on stage," having to monitor their tone, appearance, and emotional reactions. There's a persistent fear that any misstep could reflect poorly on their husband's leadership, leading many to censor themselves (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018)

Table 1 outlines the core characteristics of FLS and maps their individual consequences, structural symptoms, and institutional implications. By identifying these dimensions side by side, Table 1 offers a multi-layered analysis that connects the personal experiences of pastors' wives to broader systemic patterns. This framework helps illustrate how what may appear as isolated emotional or relational challenges are actually tied to structural conditions and institutional cultures within church leadership.

Although not all wives carry a leadership burden associated with the formal role of their husbands, wives of political and religious leaders are distinct in society for often bearing dual identities. FLS was not a formal thesis in literature, but is a term that has been used informally to describe the unique challenges, expectations, and pressures faced by women in leadership roles, particularly as the spouses of prominent leaders. This analysis is the first attempt to formalize FLS as a scholarly innovation, diagnosing the emotions and behaviors that consistently occur together because of the wife's dual identity as an informal leader. Luedtke and Sneed's (2018) study emphasizes the importance of making clergy wives' voices heard and that simply naming their reality, as distinct from their husbands' roles, is therapeutic and corrective.

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Table 1: Consequences, Structural Symptoms, and Institutional Implications of FLS

Characteristic	Individual impact	Structural pattern	Institutional effect
Role ambiguity	Disengagement or overcommitment	Inconsistent expectations, lack of training or clarity	Undefined leadership pathways, inequitable development
Emotional labor	Exhaustion, resentment, isolation	Unacknowledged work, emotional strain, relational tension	Reliance on invisible support, culture of suppression
Invisible labor	Identity loss, role overload, burnout	Gendered assumptions, resource gaps, no formal recognition	Inequity masked by spiritual framing
Image management	Identity conflict, emotional strain	Silenced struggles, limited agency	Reinforcement of toxic norms, performative spirituality

Othermothering: Theoretical Roots of First Lady Syndrome

Othermothering is a concept rooted in Black feminist thought, especially in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Collins is a distinguished sociologist and Black feminist scholar whose scholarship centers on the intersections of race, gender, and class. In her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) describes how African American women have historically engaged in "othermothering," extending care, guidance, and support beyond their biological children to nurture the well-being of the larger community. She argues that this practice functions as both a survival strategy and a form of resistance against structural inequalities, while also cultivating empowerment and leadership

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among Black women. Wane (2000) defines othermothering as the act of women caring for children who are not biologically theirs, with the goal of preserving cultural and social values. Othermothers support biological mothers by sharing child-rearing responsibilities. Community mothers go further, offering mentorship and leadership that extend beyond individual families into the broader community. Bernard et al. (2000) examined othermothering in a Black community through a religious lens. They found that this practice has evolved into a form of ministry. In this context, women, whether or not they have children of their own, take on roles as caregivers, mentors, and spiritual leaders. This version of mothering functions as both a survival strategy and a source of empowerment, giving Black women influence and agency in spaces where they've historically been excluded.

Othermothering is most observed in African American communities (Benard et al., 2000; Wane, 2000). In pre-colonial African societies, caregiving followed a collectivist model where men and women held parallel, not hierarchical, roles. Mothering was embedded in everyday life, with older women mentoring younger ones and passing down cultural knowledge. Colonial education systems disrupted these traditions. By prioritizing boys' education, they placed more caregiving responsibilities on girls and women, shifting the balance of traditional mothering roles and increasing the burden on African women (Wane, 2000).

Othermothering and the Role of the Pastor's Wife

Wane (2000) argues that othermothering pushes back against Western ideals of individualism and the nuclear family, emphasizing the value of communal care and cultural continuity. Leadership in church communities, particularly within Christian traditions, similarly challenges individualism by centering the idea of a spiritual family that functions collectively. Scripture refers to the church as the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27, *New King James Bible*), highlighting the interconnectedness of its members. It emphasizes spiritual family through the use of the terms brother and sister (1 Timothy 5:1-2, NKJV), children of God (Romans 8:16-17, NKJV), and household of God (Galatians 6:10, NKJV). The role of a pastor's wife often reflects the principles of othermothering, especially in churches that value mentorship, spiritual guidance, and community care. Table 2 outlines how the characteristics of othermothers parallel those of pastors' wives.

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Table 2: Parallels Between Othermothers and Pastors' Wives

Attribute	Othermothers	Pastors' wives
Spiritual motherhood	Care for children beyond biological ties	Provide emotional, spiritual, and material support to church members
Community leadership	Guide and support the broader community	Strengthen church ties, lead women's ministries, mentor younger members
Mentorship & discipleship	Pass down knowledge, values, and survival skills	Mentor women, couples, and families, reinforcing biblical principles
Emotional & practical support	Share caregiving duties and resources	Counsel and support congregants through personal and faith struggles
Standing in the gap	Step in during crises to support families	Provide stability during illness, grief, or church conflict
Legacy & faith formation	Transmit cultural values and life lessons	Shape the faith and values of the next generation
Challenging individualism	Foster communal child-rearing and support	Promote shared ministry and mutual care in the church

As Wane (2000) notes, "The practice of mothering is not universal, and the way it is conceived, celebrated, and practiced differs across cultures" (p.110). Similarly, the role of a pastor's wife is distinct from that of the spouse of other community leaders, such as a principal, police chief, or CEO. Her position more closely resembles that of a First Lady and othermother, blending symbolic leadership with hands-on care. The concept of FLS captures this dynamic. A pastor's wife, like an othermother, is often a central figure in communal care, mentorship, and spiritual guidance. She embodies a collective model of mothering and leadership rooted in service, presence, and relational influence.

Expanding Othermother: Toward a Framework of First Lady Syndrome

While the concept of othermother provides an important foundation for understanding how women nurture, guide, and sustain communities through informal caregiving roles (Collins, 2000), it does not fully capture the layered realities of pastors' wives. FLS expands this framework by naming the institutional, performative, and political dimensions of their experience. Unlike othermothers who operate primarily within

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grassroots networks of support, pastors' wives serve as visible symbols of their husbands' leadership and the church's moral legitimacy (Crawford, 2007; Nancarrow, 2015). Their role is simultaneously relational and representative, marked not only by emotional and invisible labor but also by constant public scrutiny and the weight of embodying the congregation's values. FLS, therefore, builds on the foundation of othermothering while extending it into a more complex framework that recognizes both the caregiving and institutional burdens uniquely placed on pastors' wives.

Biblical Examples of First Lady Syndrome

A biblical example of FLS appears in Exodus 4:24–26, where Zipporah, the wife of Moses, embodies emotional labor, invisible labor, role ambiguity, and image management. As Moses travels to Egypt to fulfill God's command, God suddenly seeks to kill him. This is likely because he failed to circumcise his son, violating the covenant outlined in Genesis 17:10–14. Zipporah intervenes, performing the circumcision herself to save Moses's life. In doing so, she steps into a priest-like role, resolving a spiritual crisis that threatens her husband's divine mission. Her action protects Moses's spiritual authority and public image, yet she receives no recognition and quickly vanishes from the narrative. This reflects the core dynamics of FLS—women stepping into crucial, often spiritual roles without formal acknowledgment or training.

Coaching as a Catalyst for Flourishing

Having outlined the dynamics of FLS, this study now turns to coaching as a strategic intervention. Each construct of FLS—role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management—highlights challenges that coaching is uniquely positioned to address. As a structured, peer-based partnership, coaching provides pastors' wives with a safe, reflective space to process expectations, clarify identity, and cultivate resilience. This section demonstrates how coaching aligns with the distinctive pressures surfaced by FLS and why it serves as a sustainable pathway for flourishing.

Addressing Role Ambiguity Through Coaching

Pastors' wives often navigate uncertain expectations that leave them overextended or excluded from leadership development pathways. Coaching helps clarify role boundaries by helping clients differentiate between personal calling and congregational assumptions. Through guided reflection and values-based goal setting, coaching enables pastors' wives to establish healthier expectations for themselves and others, reducing stress while fostering agency (Grant et al., 2010).

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Supporting Resilience in Emotional Labor

The emotional demands of caregiving and constant performance can result in exhaustion and isolation. Coaching offers a confidential space for pastors' wives to process the dissonance between authentic feelings and expected displays of joy or spiritual strength. By incorporating resilience-building practices, coaching equips them to sustain care for others without neglecting their own emotional and spiritual well-being (Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017).

Making Invisible Labor Visible

Much of the work pastors' wives perform—hospitality, event coordination, and behind-the-scenes support—remains unacknowledged and uncompensated. Coaching helps surface and name these contributions, reframing them as forms of leadership rather than incidental "helping." This recognition not only validates their labor but also empowers pastors' wives to advocate for resources and structural support within their congregations (Moseley, 2011).

Navigating Image Management with Authenticity

Pastors' wives frequently experience the pressure of maintaining a flawless public persona as symbols of morality and congregational credibility. Coaching provides strategies for balancing public expectations with private authenticity, guiding pastors' wives toward identity clarity rooted in personal values rather than external demands. This process reduces the strain of impression management while encouraging authentic presence in ministry life (Stoltzfus, 2005). Moreover, the emphasis on self-awareness and values-based reflection in coaching aligns closely with the need for pastors' wives to navigate image management while maintaining authentic presence in their congregations.

Coaching as a Developmental Framework

These coaching applications align with broader evidence on leadership development. Collins (2009) defines *coaching* as a collaborative relationship in which the coach partners with individuals to unlock potential and maximize performance. Empirical studies affirm its impact across sectors: Pousa and Mathieu (2014) demonstrate that coaching enhances performance, Allison-Napolitano (2013) describes the coach as a "thought partner" who challenges assumptions, and Wiater (2023) notes that coaching ranks among the most effective methods for preparing leaders for future challenges. Its popularity rests in its holistic nature, integrating active listening, reflection, and, in faith-based contexts, the incorporation of spiritual values as essential dimensions of growth.

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In sum, coaching directly addresses the systemic challenges revealed through FLS. It equips pastors' wives with tools that not only mitigate the burdens of their informal roles but also foster flourishing and leadership capacity within the wider church community.

Coaching Female Leaders

Research consistently shows that coaching provides distinct benefits for women in leadership by addressing the unique challenges they encounter in professional and organizational contexts. Leimon et al. (2010) argue that women leaders require tailored coaching that responds to evolving personal and professional demands, particularly during critical life stages where competing responsibilities can lead to attrition. Their framework emphasizes building confidence, cultivating networks, and strengthening resilience as central outcomes of effective coaching. Similarly, Brodrick's (2010) study of executive women in healthcare identifies improved self-awareness, stronger workplace relationships, and enhanced career advancement as key results of coaching interventions, highlighting the critical importance of the coach–client relationship in these outcomes. Stachowiak (2011) further demonstrates that coaching enhances job satisfaction and leadership effectiveness among women executives, underscoring its role in supporting women as they navigate the dual demands of leadership and caregiving responsibilities.

These findings extend beyond corporate and healthcare contexts into ministry leadership. The pressures faced by women leaders in secular organizations parallel those experienced by pastors' wives: balancing visibility with authenticity, managing competing personal and organizational demands, and sustaining resilience in environments shaped by gendered expectations. For women experiencing FLS, coaching becomes a particularly strategic intervention. Just as coaching has been shown to build networks and strengthen leadership identity in corporate contexts, it can help pastors' wives reframe their contributions as leadership, manage role ambiguity with greater confidence, and resist the identity strain associated with emotional and invisible labor.

In short, the body of scholarship on coaching female leaders establishes a strong foundation for applying coaching to the context of pastors' wives. By integrating these evidence-based practices into ministry leadership development, coaching offers both recognition of the challenges illuminated by FLS and a concrete pathway for fostering resilience, confidence, and sustainable influence among women in these informal yet high-impact roles.

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Implication and Contribution: Coaching Women Who Experience First Lady Syndrome

This article contributes to scholarship by (a) introducing FLS as a conceptual framework, (b) synthesizing prior fragmented studies into a unified model, and (c) presenting coaching as a leadership development intervention for pastors' wives. Recognizing and naming FLS carries significant implications for both scholarship and practice, particularly within religious institutions. Coaching offers a structured, peer-based partnership that aligns closely with the needs revealed through FLS. By emphasizing self-awareness, reflection, boundary-setting, and resilience, coaching addresses the emotional and relational burdens pastors' wives carry while also enhancing leadership capacity. Empirical studies further support its effectiveness in improving self-efficacy, communication, and emotional intelligence (Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017; Grant et al., 2010; Moseley, 2011). As Fry and Wiater (2023) emphasize, coaching interventions yield wide-ranging benefits at both the individual and organizational levels, including improved confidence, strengthened relationships, enhanced communication skills, and greater engagement. Importantly, coaching is distinct from traditional training because it provides a peer-based, judgment-free partnership where individuals can process experiences, gain clarity, and cultivate resilience. This is especially critical for pastors' wives, who often lack safe spaces to share their realities without fear of social or political repercussions (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018).

Research underscores this need for external, sustained support. Kum's (2015) longitudinal study of Korean pastors' wives documented the emotional strain, isolation, and role confusion they faced under cultural and religious expectations. Through a three-year peer-support model, participants reported notable growth in emotional well-being, marital relationships, and resilience. Coaching builds on this principle of structured support by offering an intentional, one-on-one partnership that emphasizes active listening and co-creative problem-solving (Christian Coaches Network International, n.d.; International Coaching Federation, n.d.).

The practical benefits of coaching, particularly in fostering self-awareness, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation, directly align with the challenges surfaced by FLS. Empirical studies affirm these benefits: Dippenaar and Schaap (2017) show that coaching enhances leaders' emotional and social intelligence, Moseley (2011) highlights gains in communication and strategic thinking, and Grant et al. (2010) demonstrate improvements in goal achievement, self-efficacy, and overall performance. These findings suggest that coaching has the capacity not only to alleviate the burdens of FLS but also to empower pastors' wives as resilient, influential leaders in their own right.

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Future Recommendation for Research

Future research could productively apply social identity theory to extend understanding of FLS and its implications for women in spiritual leadership. In particular, empirical inquiry into the question, "How are identity and influence constructed and interpreted for women in religious leadership spaces with informal authority?" would provide valuable insights. Such studies could inform leadership development frameworks by illuminating the dynamics of relational and group-based leadership as experienced by individuals in informal roles, thereby advancing both theory and practice. Additionally, this line of inquiry could identify practical tools and strategies to promote the well-being and sustainability of women leaders operating within gendered and often invisible structures of influence.

Future research should also explore how the dynamics of FLS manifest in contexts beyond political science and the church. The core features of FLS—role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management—are not exclusive to religious institutions. These dynamics are likely present in various organizational settings, including corporate, nonprofit, academic, and ministry environments, where women occupy informal or poorly defined leadership roles.

In such spaces, women are often expected to perform emotionally supportive functions, fill institutional gaps, and maintain organizational cohesion—frequently without formal titles, recognition, or clear boundaries. This includes behind-the-scenes work that sustains the organizational culture but is seldom acknowledged or rewarded. Additionally, women in these roles may be perceived as moral or emotional anchors, expected to tend to others' needs without holding formal authority. These expectations are further compounded by pressures to maintain a carefully balanced public persona: competent but approachable, authoritative but not overly assertive, successful but non-threatening. Investigating how these patterns extend across sectors could offer a broader understanding of gendered labor and help design strategies to support women navigating these complex leadership terrains.

Conclusion

FLS presents a distinct paradox in faith leadership: women who carry profound influence within congregations while lacking formal authority or recognition. By naming the complex web of expectations, emotional labor, and symbolic responsibilities that pastors' wives navigate, this analysis introduces FLS as a new scholarly framework that brings long-overdue visibility to their contributions. Recognizing this phenomenon provides language for what has often been felt but not formally articulated, offering pastors' wives both clarity and validation in their lived experience.

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While recognition of FLS provides essential conceptual clarity, sustainable solutions are also required. Coaching represents one such evidence-based intervention, offering pastors' wives structured support to navigate identity tensions, relational pressures, and institutional expectations. As demonstrated in leadership development research, coaching fosters resilience, strengthens self-efficacy, and enhances capacity for influence (Grant et al., 2010; Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017).

In sum, the articulation of FLS advances scholarship by formalizing a previously unnamed dynamic, while the integration of coaching offers a research-informed pathway toward flourishing. Together, they provide a framework for understanding and a practical strategy for supporting pastors' wives as informal yet essential leaders in the life of the church.

About the Author

Cherelle Johnson brings over a decade of strategic insight in leadership development, organizational strategy, and higher education, along with more than 20 years of experience in ministry leadership. An instructor of business and leadership since 2019, she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University, building on her M.S. in Education and B.B.A. in Marketing from James Madison University. Cherelle is also a certified HR professional (SHRM-CP), executive coach, and founder of Dream City LLC and IronDresses Inc., where she has trained leaders across the U.S. and internationally. She serves as an executive pastor at Divine Unity Community Church, founded and led by her husband, where she continues to invest in spiritual growth, leadership, and community transformation. Her teaching and research focus on leadership development, group behavior, and women's empowerment, particularly in ecclesial and organizational contexts.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cherelle Johnson, 1680 Country Club Rd., Harrisonburg, VA 22801. Email: ladyj@ducchurch.org

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Coaching the Wounded: Trauma-Informed Practices for Faith-Based Coaches

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

Christian coaching has become an increasingly vital practice in equipping individuals to pursue their purpose, foster leadership growth, and achieve spiritual maturity. However, many clients bring unacknowledged wounds from trauma that can shape how they think, feel, and lead. Traditional coaching models often overlook the profound impact of trauma on human flourishing. This paper introduces a biblically integrated, trauma-informed coaching model grounded in Dr. Rebekah Lloyd's trauma-informed leadership framework (2024). Rooted in Isaiah 61, the model emphasizes four core behaviors—understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—while maintaining clear ethical boundaries between coaching and counseling. Drawing on neuroscience, leadership studies, and biblical theology, this paper demonstrates that trauma-informed faith-based coaching not only prevents retraumatization but also fosters genuine flourishing, characterized by resilience, joy, and a sense of purpose in Christ. The paper concludes with implications for practice and future research on measuring flourishing outcomes and developing trauma-informed training for Christian coaches.

Keywords: trauma, faith-based coaching, trauma-informed, leadership

In recent years, the coaching profession has emerged as a significant influence in Christian leadership, organizational development, and spiritual formation. Faith-based coaching bridges the gap between discipleship and leadership development, guiding individuals toward growth in both purpose and character. Nevertheless, beneath the visible progress of many leaders lies an invisible reality: trauma. Studies estimate that more than 70% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). Such experiences—ranging from childhood adversity to combat exposure, relational betrayal,

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or loss—can alter brain function, emotional regulation, and relational patterns (Kozlowska et al., 2015).

Coaches often encounter the behavioral symptoms of trauma without recognizing their neurological or spiritual roots. A client may appear resistant, unmotivated, or overly anxious when, in truth, their nervous system is responding to past wounds rather than present circumstances. Without trauma-informed awareness, even well-intentioned coaching can unintentionally cause harm or deepen shame.

This paper proposes a trauma-informed, biblically grounded approach to Christian coaching that addresses the needs of wounded clients while promoting resilience and flourishing. The model builds on the trauma-informed leadership (TIL) framework (Lloyd, 2024) by translating its core behaviors into coaching practice. The theological foundation is found in *Isaiah 61*, where the mission to "bind up the brokenhearted" provides both vision and vocation for Christian coaches.

Literature Review

Trauma and the Human Experience

Trauma, broadly defined, is the emotional response to an event that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope. According to Lloyd (2024), trauma "is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, resulting in long-term psychological, emotional, and physiological effects" (p. 289). Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that trauma affects the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex—regions crucial for threat detection, memory, and executive functioning (Kozlowska et al., 2015). These changes can manifest as hypervigilance, emotional numbing, or avoidance.

In leadership and coaching contexts, trauma often appears as self-doubt, perfectionism, or relational withdrawal. Traditional performance-based coaching models may interpret these behaviors as resistance rather than protective responses. A trauma-informed lens reframes these patterns as survival strategies developed in unsafe environments (Bath, 2008).

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed care originated within mental-health and social-service disciplines, emphasizing five guiding principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Within organizational settings, TIL has been shown to reduce burnout and increase

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psychological safety (Lloyd, 2024). However, these principles remain underdeveloped in coaching research, particularly within Christian contexts.

Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework provides a foundation for adaptation. The model identifies four behavioral domains—understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—that can be translated into coaching competencies.

Flourishing and Positive Psychology

Flourishing is a central construct in positive psychology, describing a state of well-being that includes emotional stability, purpose, virtue, and social connectedness (Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017). For Christian theology, flourishing aligns with the biblical concept of *shalom*—a holistic peace that encompasses relationships with God, others, and oneself (VanderWeele, 2019). VanderWeele (2017) argued that flourishing integrates physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions, resonating deeply with a biblical anthropology that views humans as image-bearers designed for wholeness.

Integrating flourishing with trauma-informed coaching invites a shift from deficit-based recovery to strength-based growth. Coaches become facilitators of transformation rather than fixers of brokenness, guiding clients toward renewed identity and purpose.

Biblical Foundation: Isaiah 61 and the Ministry of Restoration

The theological foundation for trauma-informed faith-based coaching is found in Isaiah 61:1–3:

> The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. (*New International Version*, 2024).

Jesus affirmed this mission in Luke 4:18–19, declaring that He was the fulfillment of this prophecy Himself. The passage establishes a divine pattern of healing and empowerment: God meets human pain with presence and transforms despair into purpose. Trauma-informed coaching echoes this rhythm by meeting clients in their pain, affirming dignity, and walking with them toward freedom and flourishing in Christ.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, reflective analysis of case examples drawn from faith-based coaching sessions in which trauma-informed principles were implemented. The methodology synthesizes practitioner reflection, existing trauma literature, and biblical exegesis of Isaiah 61. The cases were analyzed to identify patterns of transformation, with particular focus on shifts in safety, empowerment, and spiritual flourishing. While exploratory, the methodology demonstrates the utility of integrating trauma-informed frameworks into faith-based coaching practice.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding Trauma: Naming the Invisible Wound

Coaches cannot help what they cannot see. The first step in trauma-informed coaching is awareness. Many clients carry trauma responses—such as people pleasing, perfectionism, or avoidance—without recognizing them as adaptations to past harm. A trauma-informed coach recognizes that behavior communicates a need. When clients appear resistant or "stuck," the coach considers whether their nervous system is in fight, flight, or freeze mode rather than labeling the behavior as defiance.

This awareness aligns with Jesus' approach in Scripture as recorded in John 4:1–26. When Jesus met the woman at the well, He saw beneath her avoidance and shame to the deeper story of rejection and longing. His response—truth spoken in safety—illustrates trauma-informed compassion. By integrating this behavior, coaches can help clients identify and name the invisible wounds that hinder their flourishing. Awareness becomes the doorway to transformation.

Regulating Distress: Cultivating Safety and Presence

Regulation is the bridge between trauma and flourishing. Neurobiologically, safety enables the prefrontal cortex to reengage, allowing for reflection, learning, and decision making (Kozlowska et al., 2015). In coaching, this means creating an emotionally safe environment characterized by trust, predictability, and empathy. Faith-based coaches have an additional resource: the ministry of presence. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, God comforts us so that we can comfort others. Coaches regulate distress by offering calm, consistent presence and inviting clients into shared reflection. Simple practices—such as grounding exercises, rhythmic breathing, or prayerful silence—help clients return to a sense of safety. Safety is not the absence of challenge but the assurance that challenge can be met with support. Trauma-informed coaching thus transforms the coaching space into a sanctuary of growth and healing.

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Empowering Others: Restoring Agency and Voice

Trauma often robs individuals of agency. Empowerment, therefore, is both ethical and theological. The trauma-informed coach resists the impulse to rescue and instead facilitates discovery. By honoring client agency, the coach restores control and self-efficacy.

Empowerment reflects Jesus' pattern in the Gospels. When He healed, He often asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" (*New International Version*, 2024, Mark 10:51). This question restored dignity and choice to those accustomed to powerlessness.

In practice, empowerment involves collaborative goal setting, reflective questioning, and affirmation of strengths. Clients learn to identify what is within their control and to align their goals with God's calling. As empowerment grows, flourishing follows—defined not by perfection but by renewed capacity for purposeful living.

Practicing Emotional Healing: Integrating Faith and Compassion

The final behavior—practicing emotional healing—bridges the psychological and spiritual dimensions of coaching. Unlike counseling, coaching does not excavate trauma histories; it creates conditions for healing through compassion, reflection, and Spirit-led guidance. Coaches facilitate healing moments by acknowledging emotion, inviting prayer, and affirming identity in Christ.

Emotional healing is also supported by neuroscience. Empathic attunement between coach and client activates the brain's social engagement system, fostering safety and connection (Siegel, 2020). Spiritually, this aligns with Jesus' ministry of presence—He wept with those who wept and sat with those in pain.

Trauma-informed faith-based coaching resists spiritual bypassing—the tendency to use religious language to avoid pain. Instead, it honors lament as a pathway to transformation. When clients are free to express sorrow and still encounter acceptance, emotional healing begins.

Distinguishing Coaching From Counseling

A central ethical distinction must be maintained: coaching is not therapy. The International Coaching Federation (2021) defined coaching as a partnership that inspires clients to maximize potential through self-discovery and action. Counseling, by contrast, treats diagnosed mental-health conditions and focuses on emotional restoration from the past (American Psychological Association, 2020). Trauma-informed coaching acknowledges trauma without treating it. Coaches operate within scope by (a)

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recognizing signs of trauma while avoiding diagnostic language; (b) referring clients to licensed professionals when symptoms exceed coaching boundaries; and (c) using forward-focused strategies to enhance resilience, not to process clinical trauma. This ethical clarity protects both client and coach while preserving the integrity of the coaching relationship.

Flourishing as the Outcome of Trauma-Informed Coaching

Flourishing represents the culmination of trauma-informed coaching. It is the state in which individuals live with resilience, purpose, and relational harmony despite past adversity. According to VanderWeele (2017), flourishing encompasses happiness, meaning, character, relationships, and health—all of which are nurtured in the safe and empowering environment of trauma-informed coaching.

Faith-based flourishing integrates the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), the virtues of perseverance (Rom. 5:3-5), and the peace of Christ (Phil. 4:7). In coaching contexts, flourishing manifests when clients regain agency, develop spiritual disciplines, and experience renewed hope and peace.

For example, one case in this study involved a ministry leader who experienced burnout and self-doubt after being betrayed by a colleague. Through trauma-informed coaching, she learned to regulate distress, establish boundaries, and rediscover her sense of calling. Six months later, she described feeling "restored, not because the pain disappeared, but because I could finally breathe again." That statement encapsulates flourishing—not perfection, but freedom.

Implications for Faith-Based Coaches and Leaders

The findings have several practical implications:

- **training in trauma literacy**: Faith-based coaches need a foundational understanding of trauma's impact on the brain and behavior. Certification programs should include education in emotional regulation, safety creation, and ethical boundaries.
- **integration of Scripture and neuroscience**: Coaches should confidently blend biblical narratives with evidence-based tools to enhance their effectiveness and impact. For example, Psalm 23 can be paired with breathing exercises to evoke a sense of calm and trust.
- **organizational application**: Churches and Christian nonprofits can implement trauma-informed leadership principles to reduce burnout, improve team health, and model Christ-like compassion.

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- **coaching supervision and community**: Coaches require safe spaces for reflection and accountability to maintain resilience and prevent compassion fatigue.

Future Research Directions

Three areas warrant further exploration:

- **empirical measurement of flourishing outcomes**: Quantitative research could measure changes in resilience, purpose, and spiritual well-being among clients receiving trauma-informed coaching.
- **curriculum development**: Future studies should evaluate trauma-informed faith-based coach training and its impact on professional competency.
- **cross-cultural adaptation**: Because cultural narratives shape the expression of trauma, the global application of trauma-informed coaching requires the use of contextual theological frameworks.

These research trajectories can advance both scholarship and practice, ensuring that trauma-informed coaching continues to evolve as a vital discipline in ministry and leadership.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed faith-based coaching offers a pathway for healing and flourishing that integrates science, theology, and leadership practice. By understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing, coaches create environments that foster safety and transformation. Rooted in Isaiah 61, this approach reflects Christ's mission to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim freedom to the captives.

In a world saturated with pain and disconnection, trauma-informed Christian coaches serve as bridges between psychological wisdom and divine grace. They are not therapists but companions in restoration—guides who hold sacred space for others to rediscover identity, purpose, and flourishing in the presence of God.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd **is a leadership scholar, veteran of the U.S. Army, and founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and is the developer of the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that integrates neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work explores how trauma-informed practices strengthen leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-**

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being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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Are We Good: How to Attain Stability, Equality, Growth, and Balance with Human Flourishing, Mental Health, and Servant Leadership

Joycelynn L. Green
Regent University
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

A delicate balance is essential to a holistic approach to well-being, one that integrates multiple dimensions of life, including the creation of safe and supportive learning environments, opportunities for personal growth, adaptability to continuous change, the promotion of human flourishing, mental health stability, and the practice of servant leadership. Greenleaf's (1970) asserted that the most effective leaders are servants first. Greenleaf identifies key tools of servant leadership as the intentional use of language, deep listening, persuasion rather than coercion, awareness and foresight, and the practical measurement of outcomes. This paper examines the extent to which Greenleaf's model of servant leadership offers insight into the ways individuals and organizations can enhance human well-being and fulfillment. Central to this discussion is the enduring question of how individuals can cultivate goodness, stability, equity, growth, and balance while fostering human flourishing and maintaining mental health through servant leadership practices. The paper further explores the capacity of both leaders and followers to serve others within their respective roles while sustaining personal development and psychological well-being. Additionally, the paper addresses the domains of life most significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the heightened relevance of mental health, leadership responsibility, and supportive environments. By incorporating an examination of the PERMA model of well-being in relation to mental health and servant leadership, this study illustrates key implications for creating positive and resilient environments. Ultimately, the paper proposes an integrated framework that unites servant leadership, mental health, and human flourishing to offer a comprehensive perspective on how individuals and organizations can achieve harmony, equity, growth, and balance. In doing so, it aligns with Greenleaf's vision of leadership as a noble pursuit aimed at creating a "better time" for all.

Keywords: human flourishing, mental health, servant leadership, stability, growth

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In an increasingly dynamic world marked by unprecedented challenges, the pursuit of human flourishing has become a critical concern. Human flourishing encompasses the multidimensional nature of individual and collective well-being, extending beyond basic survival to the realization of human potential. It involves the development of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, as well as the cultivation of meaningful relationships and purposeful contributions to society (Dahl et al., 2020). As such, understanding and promoting human flourishing is essential for fostering resilient individuals, organizations, and communities. This paper examines the interrelationship among human flourishing, mental health, and servant leadership, with particular attention to the post-COVID context (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). By analyzing these interconnected constructs, the study seeks to identify strategies for cultivating environments that support growth, balance, and reciprocal support (Aliekperova & Aliekperov, 2023). The discussion explores Robert K. Greenleaf's servant leadership framework and its conceptual alignment with the principles of human flourishing. In addition, the paper examines the PERMA model and its relevance to mental health and leadership within contemporary organizational and societal contexts (Kun et al., 2016). Through the integration of human flourishing principles, mental health awareness, and servant leadership practices, individuals and organizations can foster supportive environments that promote holistic well-being, resilience, and sustainable growth amid ongoing global challenges.

Human Flourishing

Human flourishing is a multifaceted concept that refers to the promotion of human growth and productive functioning across multiple domains of life. It extends beyond momentary pleasure or general contentment to include character development, meaningful friendships and relationships, civic engagement, and the cultivation of virtues (de Ruyter & Wolbert, 2020). At its core, human flourishing involves the development of positive character traits and the attainment of meaning, purpose, and life satisfaction (Dahl et al., 2020). This holistic perspective emphasizes that individuals experience optimal well-being when they engage in productive activity, maintain supportive social relationships, and perceive their lives as aligned with their deeply held values.

Servant Leadership: Greenleaf's Vision and Its Connection to Human Flourishing

Robert K. Greenleaf initiated a significant paradigm shift in leadership theory and is widely recognized as the founder of servant leadership. He defined servant leadership as an ethical and relational approach that prioritizes the needs, growth, and well-being of followers. Central to this framework is the leader's responsibility to foster personal development, psychological well-being, and empowerment among followers, thereby

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contributing to human flourishing and an enhanced quality of life (Colasanti, 2023). Greenleaf challenged traditional top-down leadership paradigms by asserting that effective leadership must originate from a genuine commitment to serve others. This servant-first orientation aligns closely with the principles of human flourishing, as it emphasizes the well-being and development of individuals within organizations and societies (Ahmed et al., 2022). By prioritizing the growth and empowerment of followers, servant leadership creates conditions in which human flourishing can be cultivated and sustained.

The relationship between servant leadership and human flourishing is further reinforced by their shared emphasis on human development. Servant leaders actively support individuals in identifying and developing their potential, pursuing meaningful work, and contributing positively to others (Ali & Anwar, 2021). This leadership approach fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness, core psychological needs essential for optimal human functioning. Additionally, servant leaders seek to remove structural and interpersonal barriers to growth while providing opportunities that support learning and development (Bragger et al., 2020). This mutually reinforcing relationship promotes personal growth and integrity among individuals while simultaneously enhancing the well-being and effectiveness of the organizations and communities they serve.

The Synergy of Human Flourishing, Mental Health, and Servant Leadership

The integration of human flourishing, mental health, and servant leadership represents a synergistic framework with the potential to positively transform individuals, organizations, and societies. These concepts are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing, collectively forming a system that promotes well-being, ethical leadership, and sustainable development (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018). Because human flourishing involves the optimization of individual functioning across multiple life domains, it necessarily encompasses mental health as a foundational component (Lomas et al., 2023). Psychological well-being is reflected in the presence of positive emotions, supportive social relationships, and engagement in meaningful activities, all of which contribute to an individual's capacity to flourish.

Servant leadership plays a critical role in cultivating environments that support both human flourishing and psychological safety. By prioritizing the well-being of followers, servant leaders actively promote mental health through the creation of supportive, inclusive, and psychologically safe workplaces (Ahmed et al., 2022). Such leaders encourage emotional expression, recognition, and opportunities for personal and professional growth, which are associated with improved mental health outcomes (der Kinderen et al., 2020). This emphasis on psychological well-being enables individuals to navigate adversity, sustain hope, and pursue meaningful goals effectively. The dynamic

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interplay among servant leadership, mental health, and human flourishing thus creates a virtuous cycle in which supportive leadership enhances individual well-being, fosters personal development, and contributes to the long-term vitality and ethical strength of organizations and communities.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Flourishing, Mental Health, and Servant Leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated profound disruptions to human flourishing, mental health, and leadership practices worldwide. This global crisis exposed the vulnerability of social and organizational systems and underscored the critical importance of mental health awareness and servant leadership. In the aftermath of the outbreak, individuals across diverse contexts experienced significant threats to psychological well-being and their capacity to flourish (Woods et al., 2023). Contributing factors, including social isolation, prolonged uncertainty, and economic instability, were associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Luthans & Broad, 2020).

These widespread mental health challenges prompted a reevaluation of leadership approaches, highlighting the necessity for compassion, empathy, and support, core principles of servant leadership. As a result, many organizations increased the adoption of servant leadership practices during the pandemic. Leaders who prioritized employee well-being by offering emotional support, reassurance, and flexibility were more effective in sustaining performance and navigating crisis conditions (Luthans & Broad, 2020). This shift toward servant-oriented leadership further demonstrated the value of this paradigm in fostering human flourishing and enhancing organizational resilience during periods of significant disruption.

The pandemic experience has also contributed to a renewed recognition of the importance of human flourishing and mental health within the workplace and beyond. Organizations increasingly acknowledge the need to cultivate environments that support employee well-being and remain attentive to psychological health as a critical organizational concern (Madero-Gómez et al., 2023). Consequently, COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of human-centered management practices and organizational cultures aligned with servant leadership and the promotion of human fulfillment (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). This transformation presents an opportunity for leaders and institutions to reexamine employee well-being and organizational health proactively, ensuring the sustained development of human flourishing in the face of future global challenges.

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Reaching Beyond Ourselves: Servant Leadership in Action

To effectively practice servant leadership and add meaningful value to the lives of others, both leaders and followers must extend their efforts beyond personal development alone. This approach requires the cultivation of compassion, active listening, and deliberate actions that support the personal and professional growth of others (Meuser & Smallfield, 2022). For leaders, such practices may include establishing supportive guidelines, providing opportunities for training and development, and implementing policies that accommodate work–life balance and family-friendly needs. Additionally, servant leaders must recognize individual differences and adapt their leadership approaches to meet the unique needs and strengths of each follower (Aliekperova & Aliekperov, 2023). By prioritizing follower development, leaders contribute to improved quality of life within both organizational and societal contexts.

Followers also play a critical role in advancing servant leadership principles. By applying insights gained through personal development, supporting colleagues, and actively fostering positive and inclusive environments, followers can themselves embody servant leadership behaviors (Liao et al., 2020). This shared commitment promotes a culture of continuous improvement and collective success across the service delivery process (Liao et al., 2020). Ultimately, the practice of serving others is rooted in the recognition of mutual interdependence, whereby individual well-being is closely linked to the well-being of others. Through this reciprocal process, service to others enhances both personal fulfillment and psychological well-being, reinforcing the foundational connection between servant leadership and mental health.

The PERMA Model

The PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman, is widely recognized as a foundational framework in positive psychology and mental health. PERMA is an acronym representing five core elements of well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement, each contributing to overall happiness and life satisfaction. Positive emotions encompass experiences such as gratitude, contentment, curiosity, optimism, enjoyment, passion, admiration, and affection, all of which are associated with enhanced psychological health and resilience (Qahtan et al., 2023).

Engagement refers to the extent to which individuals are fully absorbed in activities that are both meaningful and appropriately challenging. This state of “flow” promotes personal growth, skill development, and the attainment of meaningful outcomes (Kun et al., 2016). By cultivating awareness of positive emotions and deep engagement, individuals can enhance both their quality of life and their capacity for self-development.

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The component of Relationships emphasizes the importance and value of social connections within one's personal and professional networks. Supportive interpersonal relationships, alongside self-acceptance, are critical for maintaining mental health stability and fostering overall well-being (La Agteren & Iasiello, 2019). Collectively, these elements provide a structured approach to understanding and promoting human flourishing, highlighting the interdependence of psychological, social, and personal factors in achieving optimal mental health.

Meaning refers to the extent to which individuals perceive their activities and roles as valuable and purposeful. A clear sense of purpose enhances subjective experiences of energy, engagement, and overall life satisfaction (Kun et al., 2016). Achievement encompasses the effort, completion of goals, and demonstration of competence across personal and professional domains. Together with Relationships and Meaning, these components provide a stable foundation for psychological well-being by offering social support, purpose, and tangible accomplishments that reinforce life satisfaction.

The PERMA model aligns closely with both mental health principles and servant leadership practices. By attending to these five dimensions: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement, servant leaders can create conditions that facilitate positive psychological states among their followers. For instance, leaders can cultivate positive emotions through recognition and appreciation, design tasks that are engaging and suited to employees' strengths, strengthen team relationships, emphasize the significance of work, and celebrate accomplishments. These actions collectively foster a culture of thriving within organizations (La Agteren & Iasiello, 2019). Accordingly, the application of the PERMA model supports the enhancement of psychological well-being and psychological capital, particularly during periods of challenge and recovery, such as the post-COVID-19 era.

Fostering Better Times: Psychological Safety, Inclusivity, Growth, and Development for Human Flourishing Within the Workplace

Creating environments that sustain human flourishing is a fundamental responsibility of leadership across all populations. Such environments should be psychologically safe, inclusive, and supportive of growth to enable individuals to reach their full potential. Psychological safety, as defined by Jamal et al. (2022), refers to a context in which individuals feel free to express ideas, take interpersonal risks, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Psychologically safe environments encourage open dialogue, curiosity, and experimentation, providing the foundation for learning, creativity, and personal development, core elements of human flourishing.

Promoting diversity is a critical step in building societies and organizations that support human flourishing. Equality ensures that individuals are not discriminated

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against based on culture, gender, sexual orientation, race, or any other characteristic, and that everyone has access to the same opportunities (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Rather than merely tolerating diversity, inclusive environments actively value diverse perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking. Inclusive leaders intentionally involve others, amplify the voices of marginalized groups, and ensure that all members are heard in organizational decision-making processes (Dahl et al., 2020). This approach not only enhances individual satisfaction through a sense of belonging but also improves organizational productivity by leveraging the full spectrum of talent. Practical strategies such as bias-free recruitment, cultural competence training, and structured mentorship programs help dismantle systemic barriers, fostering equitable opportunities for growth and advancement (Ely & Thomas, 2020). By promoting universal participation and inclusiveness, leaders strengthen the conditions necessary for human flourishing, generating benefits that extend across society.

Human development and advancement are essential for individuals to realize their full potential. Leaders and communities can facilitate this by providing diverse opportunities for personal and professional growth, ranging from foundational education and formal learning programs to professional development initiatives, challenging assignments, and avenues for creativity and innovation (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). Such opportunities allow individuals to engage in learning experiences that are both meaningful and tailored to their interests and capabilities. By fostering multiple pathways for growth, leaders cultivate a culture of continuous self-improvement and progressive transformation. As individuals develop holistically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially, they contribute to the creation of happier, more prosperous, and resilient communities.

Creating Safe Spaces for Human Flourishing

To ensure the protection of human well-being and the advancement of quality of life both now and in the future, leaders can implement a variety of targeted strategies. First, fostering open communication and practicing active listening helps establish trust, encourages the exchange of ideas, and supports knowledge generation (Vera et al., 2020). Second, providing constructive feedback and recognition acknowledges individuals' accomplishments, motivates continued effort, and promotes overall well-being, particularly when combined with initiatives that support work–life balance and meaningful engagement (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Third, creating opportunities for collaborative work and access to peer support cultivates cooperation, learning, and the sharing of expertise (Vera et al., 2020). Fourth, implementing fair and transparent policies enhances equity, builds confidence, and reinforces a sense of organizational justice (Baker & Dutton, 2017). By applying these measures, leaders can create psychologically safe and growth-oriented environments in which individuals are empowered to develop, flourish, and succeed. These strategies contribute to building a

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stronger, healthier society in which individuals can collaborate effectively, support one another, and succeed collectively.

Conclusion

The integration of human flourishing, mental health, and servant leadership provides a robust foundation for fostering meaningful change in individuals, organizations, and communities. In the context of the challenges posed by the post-COVID world, the strategies outlined in this paper offer guidance for creating environments that support growth, adaptation, and resilience. By practicing servant leadership, leaders can cultivate organizational cultures that enhance well-being, empower individuals to realize their potential, and promote collective success.

The PERMA model offers a practical framework for fostering well-being, while psychologically safe environments provide the security necessary for individuals to learn, experiment, and develop without fear. Looking toward the future, it becomes clear that achieving "better times" requires the deliberate creation of conditions that enable individuals to thrive, the prioritization of mental health, and a commitment to the welfare of others. By transcending self-interest and fostering supportive, inclusive environments, we can work collaboratively to realize Greenleaf's vision of a society characterized by compassion, strength, and shared joy.

Building such a culture is an ongoing, dynamic process. Nevertheless, by embedding these principles into daily life, organizational practices, and global community efforts, significant progress can be made toward establishing a world in which stability, equity, growth, and harmony are the standard. In such a world, every individual has the opportunity to reach their full potential while contributing to the well-being of others, creating a sustainable cycle of human flourishing and collective success.

About the Author

Joycelynn Green has spent over 18 years navigating the complex landscapes of mental health and healthcare, driven by a single, unwavering purpose: to give a voice to those who are too often unheard. As a psychotherapist, she reaches individuals who struggle to understand or access the support they need for mental and medical stability, translating care into language they can trust and understand. For Joycelynn, trauma and mental health are never one-size-fits-all, they look and sound different for everyone, and her work is about building bridges where misunderstanding and bias might otherwise stand. Her voice carries beyond the therapy room.

Joycelynn frequently speaks at nonprofits and licensed mental health organizations, exploring the precarious line between crisis and stability, and asking a vital question: "Do we know where to turn when the line starts to zig-zag?" Her insights challenge

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both professionals and communities to rethink how mental health is understood, supported, and nurtured.

Joycelynn's academic path is as diverse as her work. She earned a doctorate from Regent University School of Business and Leadership, a master's degree in government, healthcare policy, and ethics, and a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies from Norfolk State University. Complementing her education, she holds multiple licenses and certifications spanning pharmacy, mental health, and healthcare administration, blending clinical expertise with systemic understanding. Her most ambitious endeavors are, The Rose Orchard and Cohesion Community Development Organization, innovative initiatives where housing stability and mental health support intersect. Through these programs, Joycelynn is reshaping communities, creating spaces where people not only survive but flourish, and proving that when care is thoughtfully designed and accessible, real transformation is possible.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: 10541 Jefferson Ave, Newport News, VA 23601. Email: jgreenx6@aol.com

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Wounded Strength: A Theology of Resilience in Trauma-Informed Leadership

Rebekah C. Lloyd
Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

Leadership has traditionally been associated with decisiveness, authority, and emotional invulnerability. Contemporary research in trauma-informed leadership, psychology, and neuroscience increasingly challenges this assumption. It suggests that effective leadership often emerges from integrating personal adversity rather than avoiding it. This paper develops the concept of wounded strength, a theological and research-informed model. It reframes hardship as formative to leadership development rather than detrimental. Drawing on trauma theory, neuroplasticity research, spiritual formation, and servant leadership scholarship, the study examines how leaders grow through adversity and how this growth equips them to foster emotional healing in others. The trauma-informed leadership attribute of resilience provides the foundation for understanding wounded strength. By integrating neuroscience with biblical narratives such as Joseph, David, and Paul, the paper demonstrates how suffering can become a catalyst for wisdom, empathy, and transformation. Contemporary examples from the military, nonprofit, first-responder, and adoption contexts further illustrate how lived adversity strengthens leadership capacity. Additional sections on historical leadership paradigms, practical implications, and future research situate wounded strength within broader leadership discourse. Ultimately, this paper argues that trauma-informed resilience is not about returning to a pre-adversity state but about being reshaped through hardship. Leaders who embrace wounded strength are uniquely positioned to cultivate psychological safety, steward emotional healing, and foster flourishing communities in a traumatized world.

Keywords: trauma, wounded strength, resilience, leadership, organization

The demands placed on modern leaders are intensifying across nearly every sector. Rising organizational complexity, mental health challenges, collective trauma, and chronic stress have created environments that test even the most seasoned leaders. Despite these realities, cultural expectations continue to promote an outdated model of

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leadership—one that idolizes control, emotional stoicism, and a polished exterior. Leaders often internalize the belief that strength is synonymous with invulnerability, leaving little room for authenticity, struggle, or human limitation.

An emerging body of research challenges these traditional assumptions. Scholars and practitioners in trauma-informed leadership (TIL) increasingly recognize that leadership shaped through adversity tends to produce more profound empathy, compassion, and resilience (Lloyd, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014). Similarly, neuroscience demonstrates that the brain possesses an extraordinary capacity to heal and rewire through neuroplasticity, suggesting that leaders can develop new patterns of emotional regulation and relational functioning even after significant hardship (Doidge, 2007; Siegel, 2012). Theologically, Scripture reveals a consistent pattern of God using wounded individuals to accomplish transformative leadership—from Joseph's betrayal to David's wilderness years and Paul's "thorn in the flesh."

This paper introduces wounded strength, leadership formed through adversity and surrendered to God, as a more accurate, holistic, and compassionate model of leadership than cultural ideals of flawlessness. Wounded strength acknowledges the reality of trauma while affirming the possibility of transformation. Leaders shaped by adversity do not lead despite their wounds; they lead through them, embodying a form of strength that fosters trust, emotional safety, and spiritual depth within their communities.

To develop a robust understanding of wounded strength, this study synthesizes TIL theory, neuroscience, spiritual formation, servant leadership, and biblical theology. It also incorporates new subsections on historical leadership paradigms, implications for practice, and future research directions. By integrating these interdisciplinary lenses, the paper establishes wounded strength as a comprehensive framework for understanding resilience in leadership, offering fresh insight into the formative role of suffering in shaping effective, compassionate leaders.

Historical Background of Leadership Paradigms

Understanding wounded strength requires situating it within the broader historical evolution of leadership theory. For much of recorded history, leadership has been conceptualized through models that emphasize power, control, and hierarchical authority. Ancient civilizations often viewed leaders as heroic figures endowed with supernatural strength or divine favor, leaving little room for vulnerability or emotional depth (Ciulla, 2020). Leadership during the Greco–Roman era focused heavily on rhetoric, logic, and domination—qualities associated with public success rather than interior maturity.

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By the industrial era, leadership paradigms further entrenched the ideal of the stoic, rigid, decisive leader. Early management theories, such as Taylor's scientific management, positioned leaders as rational operators expected to suppress emotion and maintain strict order (Taylor, 1911). Even later leadership models, such as trait theory, behavioral theory, and transactional leadership, continued to emphasize traits like confidence, charisma, and assertiveness as essential components of leadership effectiveness (Northouse, 2019).

The late 20th century introduced more relational models, including transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977). Among these, servant leadership was particularly revolutionary because it emphasized humility, empathy, emotional healing, and the leader's responsibility to elevate followers' well-being (Liden et al., 2008). Still, even relational leadership models did not fully integrate psychological trauma or the profound ways suffering shapes character and leadership practice.

The emergence of TIL in the 21st century marks a significant shift. Influenced by neuroscience, psychology, and social work, TIL recognizes that trauma impacts the nervous system, decision making, relationships, and organizational functioning (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). This approach acknowledges human fragility and emphasizes safety, regulation, empowerment, and healing—qualities closely aligned with biblical models of leadership and the Christian call to shepherding.

The concept of wounded strength builds on this evolution by integrating trauma-informed principles with theological insights and the servant-leadership emphasis on emotional healing. Historically, leaders have hidden their wounds to preserve credibility. Today, research has increasingly shown that leaders who appropriately acknowledge and integrate their wounds are more trusted, relatable, and resilient (Brown, 2018; Scazzero, 2015). This historical shift sets the stage for wounded strength as a modern, holistic model of leadership grounded in vulnerability, resilience, and spiritual formation.

Literature Review

The literature on trauma, leadership, and resilience has grown substantially over the past 2 decades, reflecting a broader cultural awareness of psychological distress and its effects on human functioning. Historically, trauma research emerged primarily from mental health disciplines—psychiatry, psychology, and social work—with early contributions focused on understanding the neurological, emotional, and behavioral impacts of trauma. Foundational scholars such as Judith Herman (1992), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), and Peter Levine (1997) established the groundwork for understanding

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trauma as a whole-person experience that disrupts safety, identity, and relational trust. Their findings illuminated that trauma alters the brain's stress-response system, leading to difficulties in emotional regulation, concentration, interpersonal connection, and long-term well-being.

While trauma research initially centered on clinical contexts, its interdisciplinary expansion into leadership and organizational studies is relatively recent. Organizations increasingly recognize that trauma—whether personal, historical, collective, or occupational—plays a significant role in employee engagement, trust, performance, and workplace culture (Doyle & Patel, 2020; Phillips & Loyd, 2023). This recognition has given rise to the TIL movement, which integrates psychological safety, emotional regulation, empowerment, and healing into leadership theory and practice.

Within TIL scholarship, resilience emerges as a central construct. Defined by Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) as "the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging conditions" (p. 3418), resilience is understood not as mere endurance but as adaptive transformation. This perspective aligns with broader resilience literature, which conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic process shaped by environmental supports, personal coping strategies, neurobiological adaptation, and meaning making (Southwick & Charney, 2012). Rather than a fixed trait, resilience is seen as malleable and influenced by neuroplasticity, relational connection, spiritual grounding, and intentional practice (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Siegel, 2012).

Neuroplasticity represents one of the most significant scientific contributions to understanding resilience. Neuroscientists such as Doidge (2007) and Siegel (2012) demonstrated that the brain is constantly rewiring in response to experience, including adversity. Trauma may disrupt neural pathways, but healing experiences—such as supportive relationships, reflective practice, and therapeutic or spiritual interventions—can strengthen new pathways that support emotional regulation, empathy, and leadership maturity. This biological perspective reinforces the theological truth that transformation is possible even after significant suffering.

Leadership studies provide an additional lens. Traditional leadership theories prioritized charisma, authority, and confidence, but contemporary research points toward authenticity, vulnerability, and relational capacity as crucial components of effective leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown, 2018). Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness and relational transparency; emotional intelligence highlights the importance of understanding one's own emotions and those of others (Goleman, 2011); and servant leadership underscores humility, empathy, and emotional healing (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008). These modern paradigms create fertile ground for integrating trauma-informed principles, which are inherently relational and healing oriented.

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Biblical scholarship contributes a rich theological layer to the discourse on suffering and leadership. Throughout Scripture, suffering is portrayed not as an obstacle to leadership but often as the crucible in which God forms leaders. Joseph's imprisonment cultivated discernment and forgiveness; David's wilderness wandering shaped humility, worship, and dependence on God; Paul's "thorn in the flesh" reframed weakness as a vessel for divine strength (Fee, 2014; Walton, 2016). These narratives underscore a core theme: God often shapes His leaders through adversity, making their wounds part of their calling rather than a hindrance to it.

Spiritual formation literature deepens this understanding by highlighting how disciplines such as lament, solitude, prayer, and confession contribute to inner healing and transformation. In this perspective, adversity, reflection, and honest engagement with God cultivate spiritual maturity (Foster, 1998; Scazzero, 2015; Willard, 1999). These themes parallel trauma theory's emphasis on processing painful experiences, integrating emotional truths, and forming coherent narratives that foster resilience.

Meanwhile, organizational research increasingly acknowledges the prevalence of trauma among workers, whether tied to adverse childhood experiences, systemic injustice, burnout, caregiving, frontline work, or crisis exposure (Felitti et al., 1998; SAMHSA, 2014). Leaders who understand trauma's impact are better equipped to cultivate trust, reduce reactivity, and create environments where employees feel safe to learn, grow, and contribute. Psychological safety, introduced by Edmondson (2019), complements trauma-informed practice by emphasizing trust, interpersonal risk taking, and emotional freedom as prerequisites for innovation and team cohesion.

Additionally, research on moral injury—experienced by soldiers, first responders, medical personnel, and leaders who witness or participate in morally conflicting events—provides insight into why some individuals carry deep wounds that shape their leadership philosophy (Litz et al., 2009). These wounds often heighten empathy, compassion, and moral sensitivity when integrated well, making them profoundly relevant to the concept of wounded strength.

Finally, emerging scholarship highlights the growing need for trauma-informed approaches in Christian leadership contexts. Pastors, nonprofit directors, educators, and adoptive parents increasingly navigate spaces marked by chronic stress, burnout, and collective trauma (Doehring, 2015). Theological models such as Isaiah 61's vision of healing, restoration, and beauty from ashes offer a spiritual framework that aligns directly with TIL values—safety, empowerment, trust, collaboration, and healing (SAMHSA, 2014).

Taken together, the literature demonstrates a strong interdisciplinary convergence: trauma impacts leadership, resilience is formed through adversity and neuroplasticity,

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and biblical and servant leadership models emphasize emotional healing as central to leadership identity. This convergence forms the foundation for understanding wounded strength, a holistic model that integrates trauma theory, neuroscience, spirituality, and theology to explain how leaders are shaped through suffering and how that transformation equips them to lead with compassion and purpose.

Trauma-Informed Leadership Foundations

TIL has gained traction as organizations recognize that many employees carry visible and invisible wounds into the workplace. SAMHSA (2014) identified core principles for trauma-informed systems—safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural awareness—which provide a framework for organizational life. TIL applies these principles to daily management and interpersonal decision making.

Lloyd's (2024) TIL framework emphasizes both leadership attributes and behaviors. Attributes such as authenticity, emotional intelligence, relational capacity, and resilience describe a leader's internal development, while behaviors—including understanding trauma, regulating distress, empowering others, and practicing emotional healing—address how leaders engage external environments. Resilience is especially relevant to wounded strength because it involves maintaining stability and flexibility in the face of adversity, rather than suppressing or avoiding difficulty.

TIL also acknowledges that leaders influence emotional dynamics across teams. Neurobiological research has indicated that individuals often unconsciously attune to leaders' emotional states through processes of coregulation (Porges, 2011). Leaders who demonstrate calm presence, emotional boundaries, and thoughtful responsiveness create a sense of safety that allows others to participate fully, learn, and collaborate effectively.

Systems thinking is essential to TIL. Trauma is not only an individual concern but can also operate at the organizational level through unclear policies, inconsistent practices, or cultures of fear and silencing (Bloom & Farragher, 2013). Trauma-informed leaders help identify and address systemic patterns that contribute to distress, offering clarity, transparency, and consistency where possible. Wounded strength adds another layer by highlighting how leaders' lived experiences shape their ability to model empathy, respond to distress, and pursue healing-oriented change.

Neuroplasticity and Resilience

Neuroplasticity provides scientific grounding for the claim that leaders can grow through adversity. Research has shown the brain remains adaptable across the lifespan, forming new neural pathways as individuals engage in learning, reflection, and relational connection (Doidge, 2007; Siegel, 2012). Trauma disrupts networks associated

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with memory, executive functioning, and emotional regulation, but healing experiences strengthen connections, thereby improving resilience (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

The relevance to leadership becomes clear when we consider stress and decision making. Leaders often face situations that require calm thinking, emotional awareness, and relational sensitivity. Neuroplasticity suggests these skills are not simply innate but can be cultivated intentionally over time. Practices like reflective journaling, prayer, counseling, spiritual direction, and coaching support neural integration and emotional stability. Over time, these practices help leaders engage conflict without escalating tension, recognize others' distress patterns, and communicate with compassion.

Importantly, neuroplasticity aligns with a broader understanding of resilience as transformation rather than quick recovery. Southwick and Charney (2012) argued that resilience develops through gradual adaptation to challenge, shaped by purpose, support, and personal agency. Wounded strength extends this idea to leadership identity, suggesting that leaders who face hardship with honesty and relational support often emerge more attuned to others' needs, more grounded in values, and better able to sustain presence in stressful environments.

Theological Foundations of Wounded Strength

Theological perspectives offer a deeper context for wounded strength by framing suffering as formative rather than merely disruptive. Biblical narratives repeatedly show leaders shaped by hardship. Joseph's betrayal and imprisonment exposed him to loss and injustice, yet those experiences developed discernment and prepared him to lead during a crisis (Walton, 2016). David's years in the wilderness cultivated patience, humility, and spiritual dependence as he navigated threat and uncertainty (Brueggemann, 1997). Paul's "thorn in the flesh" redirected his reliance from personal strength to divine sufficiency, expressing a theology of weakness transformed by grace (Fee, 2014).

Themes of lament and sanctification are central here. Lament allows honest expression of grief and confusion before God without diminishing faith (Wolterstorff, 1987). Sanctification views personal transformation as an ongoing process shaped through trial and perseverance (Willard, 1999). Together, these theological concepts suggest that hardship is not a sign of spiritual failure but an environment in which character deepens.

Isaiah 61 describes God as one who heals brokenness, restores dignity, and brings beauty from ashes. Leaders who embrace wounded strength participate in this restorative work—not by erasing their past but by allowing God to transform their experiences into empathy, wisdom, and resilience. Rather than hiding vulnerabilities, they lead with appropriate transparency and spiritual grounding. The theological vision

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of wounded strength reframes leadership identity, emphasizing dependence on God, humility in practice, and authenticity in relationship.

Servant Leadership and Emotional Healing

Servant leadership emphasizes relational presence and the well-being of followers as central to effective leadership. Greenleaf (1977) introduced the idea that leaders are called to serve first, then choose to lead, placing empathy, listening, and care at the heart of influence. Later research identified emotional healing as a distinctive component of servant leadership, describing leaders who help others work through pain, restore hope, and develop resilience (Liden et al., 2008).

Wounded strength resonates strongly with this trait. Leaders who have endured their own struggles often carry a different kind of attentiveness to others. Their experience enables them to notice distress earlier, respond without judgment, and create environments where individuals feel seen and safe. This shift fosters psychological safety, which is an essential foundation for healthy communication and team learning (Edmondson, 2019).

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) noted that servant leaders do not simply encourage; they actively cultivate environments where people can process setbacks and grow. Wounded strength enriches this approach by emphasizing that leaders can offer emotional healing authentically when their own wounds have been acknowledged and integrated. Instead of masking hardship, leaders model realistic resilience, demonstrating that growth through struggle is possible.

This approach does not romanticize suffering or assume that all hardship leads to wisdom. Instead, it recognizes that supported and examined suffering can produce depth of character. Servant leadership, combined with trauma-informed practices, points toward leadership rooted in presence, compassion, and responsibility for the emotional climate of an organization. Wounded strength strengthens this vision by grounding emotional healing in leaders whose lives have already been shaped by adversity and grace.

Biblical Case Studies of Wounded Strength

Joseph

Joseph's story illustrates how severe trauma can lead to mature leadership marked by emotional intelligence and strategic wisdom. Betrayal by his brothers, forced relocation, false accusation, and imprisonment could have produced anger or suspicion. Instead, Joseph emerged with a capacity for discernment and reconciliation that proved crucial in responding to a national crisis (Walton, 2016). His declaration to his brothers, "You

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meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (*New International Version* [*NIV*], 2024, Gen. 50:20), reveals a leader able to acknowledge harm without being defined by it.

Two insights from Joseph's story are especially relevant for wounded strength. First, we see Joseph's identity shifted from favored son to reflective leader. His experiences required him to reconsider his relationships, ambitions, and sense of purpose. Secondly, his eventual position of power did not erase his history; it informed his compassion. Joseph's response to famine was not merely administrative but relational, emphasizing restoration over retribution. Leaders who have integrated suffering often exhibit similar patterns; they make decisions with awareness of human cost.

David

David's early years demonstrate leadership development under sustained threat. While fleeing Saul, he lacked political power or social favor, yet those wilderness years deepened his reliance on God and strengthened his emotional vocabulary. The Psalms provide evidence of David's willingness to bring fear, grief, and hope before God without self-censorship (Brueggemann, 1997). His prayers show a leader learning to engage complex emotions rather than suppress them.

There are two takeaways from David's example. David learned to lead without certainty or control. Living with unpredictability instilled patience and flexibility, qualities essential to TIL. Next, we can see that David's experiences cultivated humility. When David gained authority, he had already learned to serve, listen, and wait. Wounded strength often emerges as confidence grounded in awareness of personal limitation and dependence.

Paul

Paul provides a theological foundation for wounded strength. His "thorn in the flesh" became a point of spiritual transformation rather than disqualification. Paul consistently interprets adversity as an opportunity for divine strength to work through human limitation (Fee, 2014). His epistles show a leader shaped not by uninterrupted success but by repeated hardship, imprisonment, and rejection.

Meaning making transformed Paul's suffering into his mission. Paul reframed hardship under God's purposes, an approach that mirrors psychological research showing that resilience is strengthened by narrative coherence (Southwick & Charney, 2012). Additionally, Paul cultivated interdependence. He often asked for prayer, reported personal struggles, and acknowledged his need for support, from which we learn vulnerability as compatible with leadership authority.

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Together, Joseph, David, and Paul illustrate how suffering can shape leaders who value presence, compassion, and wisdom. Their examples show wounded strength is not a marginal biblical theme but a recurring pattern in leadership formation.

Contemporary Case Studies: Wounds as Leadership Formation

Military Leaders

Military service exposes leaders to trauma, loss, and moral complexity. Many veterans experience posttraumatic growth, developing heightened empathy, clearer ethical priorities, and a deeper appreciation for relational trust (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Leaders who have navigated deployment stress, combat exposure, or moral injury often exhibit a stabilizing presence that helps others remain grounded during crisis.

From this case study, we learn three strengths that align naturally with TIL principles and illustrate wounded strength in practice. To begin, leaders who have served in combat often recognize distress quickly and respond without minimizing it. Next, exposure to profound ethical questions in high-stakes environments strengthens commitment to integrity and justice. Finally, regular engagement with uncertainty cultivates flexible decision making and emotional regulation.

Nonprofit Leaders

Nonprofit founders and directors frequently draw motivation from personal loss or encounters with systemic injustice. Their leadership often emerges from experiences that ignited compassion and conviction (Doyle & Patel, 2020). This purpose-driven approach fuels long-term commitment even when work is demanding or emotionally exhausting.

Two characteristics are common among nonprofit leaders. First, leaders act from a lived understanding of the stakes involved, along with professional responsibility. Second, we see that transparency about personal experience invites others into shared mission and reduces stigma surrounding difficult topics. These leaders demonstrate how appropriately integrated suffering becomes a sustaining source of empathy and direction.

Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents often undergo intensive engagement with trauma with both their children's trauma histories and the systemic challenges of adoption and foster care. These experiences position them as trauma-informed leaders within families, schools, and communities. This group of leaders shows us two key strengths. First, empathy deepens through exposure to trauma responses, building the capacity to recognize and

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respond to distress with patience and support. Second, navigating bureaucratic complexity leads many adoptive parents to become advocates for reform and child welfare improvements. Their leadership illustrates how lived experience can transform into sustained advocacy and relational resilience.

First Responders

First responders encounter acute trauma regularly, including injury, loss of life, and crisis environments. Research has shown these experiences can create strong bonds, heightened situational awareness, and deep commitment to community well-being (Anderson et al., 2020). When properly supported, first responders often become sources of calm and encouragement within teams. From first responders, we can learn three lessons. One, repeated exposure to emergencies fosters emotional regulation and clear thinking under pressure. Two, witnessing suffering sensitizes leaders to human need and motivates protective action. Three, many first responders become wellness advocates or peer support leaders after navigating trauma personally. These lessons demonstrate wounded strength in motion as being leadership that steadies others, supports healing, and protects community safety.

Implications for Practice

Wounded strength offers a practical lens for leadership development and organizational culture. First, leadership programs can expand beyond traditional competencies to include emotional regulation, trauma awareness, and reflective practice. While most training focuses on communication or strategic planning, TIL emphasizes the internal conditions that allow leaders to respond wisely to stress and uncertainty (Lloyd, 2024). Practices such as journaling, debriefing, and structured peer support can help leaders process experiences that shape their identity.

Second, organizations can benefit from normalizing vulnerability as a healthy part of leadership rather than a sign of weakness. Research has shown that employees often mirror their leaders' emotional tone (Boyatzis et al., 2012; Goleman, 2011). Leaders who acknowledge challenges appropriately and seek support when needed contribute to healthier team climates. Formal structures such as coaching, chaplaincy services, or confidential peer discussion groups can create sustainable avenues for leaders to engage in their own healing.

Third, TIL highlights the importance of coregulation. A leader's emotional presence can stabilize a room during conflict, uncertainty, or crisis. Training in grounding techniques, nervous system awareness, and compassion fatigue is especially valuable in high-stress environments, including healthcare, child welfare, and first responder

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contexts (Porges, 2011). Stability and calm presence support psychological safety and reduce the likelihood of escalating tension.

Fourth, wounded strength encourages organizations to rethink resilience. Rather than measuring resilience by how quickly leaders "bounce back," organizations can recognize growth through adversity as a process that deepens insight and develops relational capability. This approach values rest, healing, and community support as essential components of resilience rather than optional supplements.

Finally, servant leadership models reinforce the practical value of wounded strength by prioritizing emotional healing. Leaders who learn from personal adversity tend to listen more carefully, maintain appropriate boundaries, and offer compassion without losing clarity or accountability. Such leadership is not merely comforting; it is strategic and sustainable for long-term organizational health.

Future Research Directions

Several areas of research would advance the study of wounded strength in TIL. One potential direction is to examine how leaders integrate personal adversity into their professional practice over time. Longitudinal studies could explore whether leaders with significant traumatic experiences show sustained growth in empathy, decision making, and team engagement.

Further research is needed on the neurological aspects of leadership development. Neuroplasticity research has demonstrated that adversity and healing reshape neural pathways (Doidge, 2007; Siegel, 2012), yet little work investigates how spiritual practices, coaching, or mentoring might reinforce neural integration for leaders. Connecting leadership studies with neuroscience could provide additional insight into how emotional regulation and resilience are cultivated.

Future studies could also explore spiritual formation as a component of leadership development. Although biblical and theological literature highlights transformation through suffering, empirical research linking spiritual disciplines with leadership resilience remains limited. Qualitative research could examine leaders' experiences with prayer, Scripture reflection, or community support as sources of healing and growth.

Another vital direction involves examining wounded strength across demographics. Experiences of trauma, access to resources, and cultural interpretations of vulnerability vary widely. Research that includes diverse racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds would offer a broader understanding of how wounded strength develops in different contexts.

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Lastly, work at the intersection of servant leadership, moral injury, and trauma-informed practice may provide valuable insight. Leaders in high-stress environments, such as the military, healthcare, ministry, or child welfare, often encounter moral dilemmas that shape their sense of identity and purpose. Studies exploring how leaders repair moral injury and develop a constructive narrative of suffering could help clarify the long-term implications of wounded strength.

Conclusion

Wounded strength offers a meaningful model for TIL, grounded in research from neuroscience, spiritual formation, and biblical studies. Rather than treating hardship as a barrier to leadership, wounded strength suggests that adversity can become a source of resilience, empathy, and relational credibility when acknowledged and supported.

The biblical narratives of Joseph, David, and Paul show that God often forms leaders through seasons of difficulty rather than exemption from them. Contemporary examples of military leaders to nonprofit advocates, adoptive parents, and first responders demonstrate similar patterns in practice. Their experiences show leadership shaped by humility, presence, and emotional awareness.

Wounded strength is not a call to seek suffering or romanticize trauma. Instead, it recognizes that hardship is an inevitable part of life and leadership. Leaders who engage their experiences with honesty, support, and spiritual perspective often emerge better equipped to lead with compassion, clarity, and endurance. In a world marked by crisis and change, wounded strength offers a model of leadership that values healing, cultivates psychological safety, and supports long-term resilience.

About the Author

Dr. Rebekah C. Lloyd is a leadership scholar, a veteran of the U.S. Army, and the founder of the Lloyd Center for Trauma-Informed Leadership. She holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership and developed the Trauma-Informed Leadership Impact Framework, a research-based model that combines neuroscience, emotional intelligence, and organizational strategy. Her work examines how trauma-informed practices enhance leadership effectiveness, resilience, and organizational well-being. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Lloyd, email: rebekah@lloydconsultingfirm.com.

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RESEARCH ROUNDTABLES
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The 7-Stages of Disciple Making

Joshua Clark
Regent University
Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

The modern church faces a crisis of discipleship, characterized by declining engagement, wavering faith, and a loss of clarity regarding what it means to follow Jesus faithfully. Despite unprecedented access to resources, there is growing confusion regarding Christian doctrine and the necessity of spiritual practices (Barna, 2025). Furthermore, churches often substitute programs and events for intentional disciple-making. This proposal presents a conceptual framework for a biblically grounded, theoretically informed model of discipleship that integrates servant leadership and followership theories. The 7-Stage Disciple Making Framework offers both theological conviction and practical application for discipleship development in diverse contexts. With this framework, leaders can be equipped to develop disciples and address wavering faith and declining mental health, thereby contributing to human flourishing. Many Christians struggle with spiritual development and overall disengagement with the Church (Barna, 2025). There is also a growing misunderstanding regarding Christian doctrine and what it means to follow him. Leadership studies have often regarded Jesus as a model leader, particularly in the context of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). However, direct, one-on-one disciple-making, from a followership and servant leadership perspective, is often neglected within the literature. This framework aims to address key questions in discipleship through a sequential series of steps. The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework is both conceptual and practical, drawing on scriptural exegesis, theological writings, leadership and followership theory, and lived ministry experience. Disciple-making goes through seven stages: Surrender, Self-Denial, Submission, Stewardship, Service, Sacrifice, and Suffering. Each stage enables disciples to assess their spiritual journey and development. By integrating this framework into the disciple-making process, Christian leaders are better equipped to develop disciples.

Keywords: servant leadership, discipleship, sacrifice, suffering, mentorship

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The modern world is marked by rapid cultural shifts and increasing spiritual apathy. The church faces a crisis of discipleship. Many believers find themselves caught in cycles of wavering faith, spiritual confusion, and disengagement from the local church (Barna, 2025). Despite widespread access to resources, programs, and theological training, the core mission of the church—to make disciples—has often been reduced to merely attending events and consuming content. The result is a growing number of professing Christians who lack clarity on what it truly means to follow Jesus.

This article addresses the urgent need for a more robust, transformational discipleship framework. The proposed framework moves beyond surface-level engagement toward lifelong formation. Rooted in both theological conviction and practical application, the proposed 7-Stages of Disciple Making framework offers a path forward. The example of Christ, paired with leadership and followership theory, forms the seven stages: surrender, self-denial, submission, stewardship, service, sacrifice, and suffering. With a firmer foundation in these stages, practitioners will be better equipped to gauge their spiritual maturity and foster others' spiritual growth.

Theoretical Background of Servant Leadership

The term *servant leadership* was coined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf, an AT&T executive, in his seminal work *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf described a servant leader as "servant first," highlighting that authentic servant leadership begins with a desire to serve others before seeking to lead (p. 6). This perspective represents a significant shift from traditional leadership models that have customarily focused on authority and control (Northouse, 2019). Spears (1998) further clarified this concept by outlining the 10 key characteristics of servant leaders, as outlined in Greenleaf's essays: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth, and community building. This provided the foundation for servant leadership.

Building on Spears, Patterson (2003) introduced seven additional servant leadership qualities: love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. These highlighted that servant leadership stems from love at the core. One cannot truly serve without coming from a place of love. Servant leadership continues to gain popularity and is being implemented in companies worldwide (Sendjaya, 2015).

However, servant leadership was not invented by Greenleaf. More than 2,000 years earlier, Jesus Christ provided the perfect example of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2016). His leadership challenged cultural norms by embodying service, humility, and sacrifice. In Matthew 23:11, Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant" (*New International Version*, 2011 [all scripture cited in this paper come

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from this version of the Bible). This stemmed from a place of love, which is apparent in his command to love God and love others (Mark 12:30-31).

Despite its biblical roots and growing academic interest, the literature reveals a gap in exploring the process of Jesus' discipleship. Through his intentional development of his followers and close relational approach, leaders today can be informed on how to make disciples. Few studies have examined how this discipleship framework, through a leadership lens, can be structured and practically applied to cultivate servant leaders, representing an important area for further research and practice.

Conceptual Development

The 7-Stages of Disciple-Making Framework emerged in response to the challenges of modern discipleship, specifically the lack of a clear, progressive framework for spiritual growth and multiplication. In both formal and informal contexts, I observed that many Christians lack self-awareness regarding their spiritual maturity and do not undergo a disciple-making process that resembles that outlined in Scripture.

To mediate these challenges, I developed a conceptual framework that identifies seven stages of discipleship: surrender, self-denial, submission, stewardship, service, sacrifice, and suffering. Though this framework is not yet substantiated through empirical research or systematic theological exegesis, it is grounded in four key sources: (a) direct study of the scriptures and application of exegetical analysis, (b) theological and pastoral writings on discipleship, (c) contemporary followership and leadership theory, and (d) personal spiritual formation and real-life ministry experience as both being discipled and discipling others.

The framework is intentionally conceptual, providing a structure while offering an adaptable approach to spiritual formation and multiplication. Each stage represents progression in the discipleship process and is designed in a reproducible manner to help leaders develop more deeply committed followers of Jesus. The goal of this framework is to be founded in both theology and contemporary research, while remaining highly applicable to various faith-based situations (e.g., churches, families, workplaces, organizations, teams, and personal relationships). This framework is both science and art.

With each stage beginning with the letter *s*, this provides a memorable design that can be easily understood in all contexts. For example, this framework is to be presented in both the United States and the Dominican Republic. It will also be shared in both conference and church settings. The universality and simplicity of the framework provide application in various settings.

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The Seven Stages of Disciple Making

In this framework, seven stages build off one another. However, as disciples develop through each stage, particular areas of their lives may be closely aligned with a previous stage. This reflects the dynamic nature of life and the constant struggle and fluctuation of one's faith. However, as a disciple matures, their overall disposition will progress through the seven stages of development.

All the stages are reflected throughout scripture and are generally accepted as spiritual truths of the Christian faith. In congruence, each stage is supported in psychology, philosophy, business, leadership, and followership theory. For the sake of this article, and the focus of this conceptual development, scripture, followership, and leadership theory are used to support each other. The stages are divided into two parts: following (Stages 1-3) and leading (Stages 4-7). Disciples begin by following God and then other faithful followers of Christ. Only after they have followed can they lead others through their spiritual maturity.

Surrender

Discipleship begins with an initial surrender. A person must have an openness to Christ and believe in their heart that he did in fact die and resurrect to pay the penalty for the world's sin (Rom. 10:9). Any attempt to live out one's faith, without undergoing this initial surrender, results in a false faith (Matt. 7:21-23), which in turn results in a poor product of one's work on earth (Matt. 7:16). Jesus said that many will come to him and recognize Him as Lord, yet he will tell them that he never knew them (Matt. 7:22-23). Jesus requires more than lip service; he requires a genuine, heartfelt belief in him as savior.

Before anyone can lead others, they must surrender themselves to a cause. Many people are motivated to acquire wealth. Some individuals attach themselves to a particular cause, such as global warming, racism, or world hunger. Jesus asks for a complete surrender to him. Everything else will follow. This initial step is referred to as salvation and can only come from the grace of God through faith alone in him. Salvation is the ticket to heaven, and those who genuinely believe in Christ surrender their life to him.

Self-denial

Once someone has surrendered themselves to Christ, the next step is to deny themselves. This means forgoing all personal wants and desires and instead desiring God only. Jesus stated that everyone must first love God with their entire heart, mind, and soul (Matt. 22:37). To do this, they must deny their desires (Matt. 16:24). This is a difficult task that is undertaken throughout a lifetime. Paul referred to this as sanctification—the ongoing process of working out one's salvation. It is the willful

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surrender of one's life and choosing to shed away the sinful nature of a person and grow more like Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:23). If someone truly believes in Jesus Christ, their natural reaction will be to strive to become more like him (Bonhoeffer & Metaxas, 1995). It will be the believer's only true desire and will consume their entire life to achieve. This step is unique in that it occurs throughout the entire discipleship process. Every step of the way, the disciple must continue to deny themselves and choose God.

Submission

The disciple has surrendered their life to Jesus and begun the journey of denying themselves. The next step is to submit to God's will. This means adopting a posture of obedience. There are three areas of life where scripture requires submission: to God (James 4:7), to godly leaders (Heb. 13:17), and to the Christian community (Eph. 5:21). The first is more obvious; disciples are to submit their lives to Jesus and follow his commands. Next, they are to follow those entrusted to lead. Some people—mentors, teachers, and pastors—have faithfully dedicated their lives as disciples and walked this journey longer; these are the people disciples will submit to. Finally, disciples are called to submit to the Christian community—the church. The church is the body of believers, and the disciple submits to the needs of the community. They no longer live for themselves but for Christ and others. This is the second half of the great commandment: "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Any effective follower, whether it be in faith or for an organization, must be willing to submit to the leader (Chaleff, 2009). This is not a blind submission but a willful submission to follow with care.

Stewardship

Now begins the shift from following to leading. The first half was inward; in the second half, disciples begin to share the light they have received with the world (Matt. 5:14). This begins by stating what the believer already possesses—the three key components to this of spiritual gifts, vocation, and relationships. Each person has particular skills, but spiritual gifts go beyond human ability. Spiritual gifts are bestowed by God to the believer in the initial surrender. The disciple must discern which spiritual gifts they possess and how to develop them (DellaVecchio & Winston, 2015). Spiritual gifts are given particularly to serve the body of believers and give glory to God. The next is vocation, at this point the disciple has committed themselves entirely to God, and part of this may require a career change (Witherington, 2011). By submitting to God's will and the guidance of godly leaders, the disciple can determine their true vocation. They may be called to stay where they are; however, their work will change as a result. They are no longer working for themselves but for the kingdom of God. The disciple must also steward their relationships. They will lead others to God and raise their families in the faith (1 Tim. 3:4-5). It may mean they must remove some relationships from their life if needed (Matt. 19:29).

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This step requires action and marks the beginning of the disciples' leadership journey. It starts right where they are. Stewardship is one of the 10 characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 1998). Furthermore, stewardship can be defined as "to hold something in trust for another" (Block, 1993, p. xxiv). In this sense, the disciple is now holding their life in trust for God. The possessions, jobs, people, skills, and spiritual gifts that are given to the disciple are not their own but God's, and they have been entrusted to hold and use those in trust.

Service

The next step is to lead by serving. Jesus did this when he washed the feet of his disciples (John 13). This task was reserved for the lowest members of society, and the fact that Jesus did this for his disciples was blasphemous. However, he was setting an example for the disciples on what it meant to lead. After loving God, the goal of disciples is to serve others. By serving, they lead. They help them grow and, in turn, accomplish what Greenleaf (1970) stated as the true test of servant leadership: "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 6). By serving others, by serving the church, and by serving God, the disciple spreads love to others, lifts them up, and produces people who, in turn, will serve.

Sacrifice

The next stage for the disciple is sacrifice. It is one thing to serve others but another to sacrifice. Sacrifice has two components: need and cost. The need refers to the need being served. There is something that someone else, or a cause, needs. The cost refers to what it costs the disciple to fill that need. Many people will serve others when it does not cost them anything, but this step comes when something needs to be sacrificed by the disciple. Ultimately, this is reflected in the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross (Matt. 27:32-56). Jesus gave his life so that we could be purchased as a ransom (John 3:16-18). It cost Jesus a lot, but it was for something greater. Disciples will also be called to make sacrifices. This may be their job, their relationships, or their dreams to fulfill some need in the world. God will call believers into places they never thought they would go, and disciples must follow, no matter the cost. The first disciples, Andrew and Peter, were fishermen working on their boats when Jesus came and asked them to follow him (Matt. 4:18-22). Matthew was a tax collector (Matt 9:9). Each of them sacrificed their career to follow Jesus. Matteson and Irving (2006) pointed out that servant leadership falls short in the area of sacrifice. They highlighted another theory, self-sacrificial leadership, as a means to fill this gap. For organizations, a leader's sacrifice can yield positive results for both the followers and the organization.

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Suffering

The final stage is suffering. It is also the least enjoyable stage, yet unavoidable. All Christians will suffer at some point—some to a greater degrees than others. Disciples must not shy away from suffering but rather rejoice in it (Rom. 5:3). This is not a patronizing term. What Paul meant when it comes to rejoicing in hardship is that the disciple knows that all things work out for the glory of God (Rom. 8:28) and that their suffering will be rewarded in heaven (Matt. 5:10-12). All people will suffer at some point, but the disciple is assured that there is a reason behind it, though it may be unknown. What is known is that God will be glorified through it. Every one of the apostles, except John, was brutally murdered for their faith (MacArthur, 2002). They suffered greatly, yet it is their death that gave meaning to the faith. Many people believe in God today because of the Apostles' faithfulness despite their suffering, which, in turn, glorified God. The primary difference between sacrifice and suffering is that sacrifice is undertaken to gain something else. Suffering is just suffering for no apparent reason. It is the enduring of persecution, hate, and abuse. Jesus could have died peacefully and then risen from the dead; instead, he was brutalized, horribly, before being crucified. He suffered dearly, yet he did not stop loving the Father with his whole heart, mind, and soul.

Leadership theory does not address suffering much, especially in the sense of it being a positive outcome. However, servant leadership theory suggests that leaders must heal others (Spears, 1998). If a fellow disciple is suffering, the disciple must help them if possible. They must come alongside and help. Where can they help heal and raise the spirits of their followers? This is the most challenging stage of the process and takes the most effort from the Christian community to combat.

Application

The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework aims to facilitate practical application in various settings, with a focus on one-on-one discipleship mentoring. Too often, churches, colleges, and workplaces focus on development at scale, through sermons, classes, and programs. These have their time and place. However, intentional one-on-one engagements provide greater depth to development (Hamid & Rasheed, 2022). Practitioners, whether pastors, lay leaders, mentors, or kingdom businesspeople, can use this framework to assess themselves and others on their spiritual growth journey.

Conclusion

Servant leadership, when understood through the lens of the discipleship framework, becomes more than a theory; it is a transformative journey. The 7-Stages of Disciple Making Framework offers a biblically grounded and theoretically informed path for disciple-making, progressing from surrender to suffering. The 7-Stages of Disciple

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Making Framework is founded on scriptural insights, paired with contemporary leadership and followership theory, empowering believers to grow as both faithful followers and impactful servant leaders.

About the Author

Joshua Clark blends ministry, business, and education into a unified perspective with a single purpose — making disciples. He helps individuals, teams, and organizations navigate the tension between following and leading, recognizing that both are essential. Faith and work do not have to clash; together, they can fuel greater productivity and fulfillment.

His expertise is grounded in experience, education, and results. Over the past decade, Joshua has done everything from scrubbing toilets to owning a business. He's helped organizations expand from local to national operations, built a marketing department for a digital media company, and facilitated millions in revenue for a Fortune 100 company. These diverse roles have shaped his understanding of Customer Experience (CX) and Organizational Development (OD).

To complement his business experience, Joshua earned multiple degrees and is currently a doctoral candidate at Regent University, specializing in Servant Leadership. Also taught as an adjunct professor for 5 years. His message on leadership and discipleship has been shared internationally through academic publications, conferences, pulpits, and online platforms, reaching thousands worldwide.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joshua Clark via LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/joshuajclark13/ Email: Joshua.clark13@outlook.com

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Cultivate Wise Christian Leaders Through wu-wei in an AI-Driven World

Maria Lai-Ling Lam
LCC International University, Lithuania
Roundtable: Transformative Innovation

Abstract

This study drew on a comprehensive body of literature on *wu-wei*, artificial intelligence (AI) social-technological systems, and three decades of reflective practice in higher education and business to examine how Christian business educators can prepare students for wise leadership in an era of AI-driven transformative innovation. It argued that integrating *wu-wei*—the Taoist principle of effortless action—into Christ-centered AI ethics offers wisdom for leadership formation, cultivating epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility. These qualities enable leaders to ethically navigate many disruptive changes, uphold Kingdom values, and envision alternative ecosystems that advance human flourishing, while fostering spiritual growth and critical digital literacy. Through the practice of *wu-wei*, leaders develop the capacity to intuitively discern essential elements of complex situations and seek synergy with patience and being fully present. They also experience the ideal state of effortless action or "flow" in their performance. They deepen self-awareness and collective consciousness for Christ's Kingdom, grounding wisdom in cultivated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of mind to the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Christ-centered AI ethics, *wu-wei*, epistemological flexibility, collective consciousness, synergy

Artificial intelligence (AI) innovation brings both significant opportunities and profound risks (Acemoglu, 2024; Cazzaniga et al., 2024; Cerutti et al., 2025; Crawford, 2021; Holmström & Carroll, 2024; Klinova, 2024; Lam, 2024b; Maslej et al., 2024; United Nations, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024, 2025). AI can be deployed on a large scale and great speed without understanding the impact of AI on current social norms and human values (Hinton, 2023a, 2023b; Russell, 2019, 2022; Zewe, 2022). As AI models grow larger and more complex, while frequently repeating similar mistakes, many AI scientists demand stronger oversight, human control, and broad stakeholder engagement (Goel et al., 2025).

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AI is bounded to particular epistemologies (Bommasani et al., 2024; Maslej et al., 2023; Sheikh et al., 2023). It generally focuses on the economics of scale, economic prosperity, and maximizing selected notions of expected utility at the expense of human dignity and local communities (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Tacheva & Ramasubramanian, 2023). AI's algorithm cannot fully capture the depth and complexity of human consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). AI has already been found to create epistemic injustice and make many bad decisions (Eubanks, 2018; Fricker, 2007). Thus, overreliance on AI will erode potential leaders' capability to make wise judgement in addressing complex problems and appraise the particularity of the situation that is not described by existing pretrained data sets in AI. Potential leaders must develop their refined capacities to make judgments in circumstances with ambiguities, conflicting values, and surprises that are beyond boundaries set by AI epistemology mechanism. This is the research question: In what ways can Christian business educators effectively prepare students to become wise leaders who integrate diverse epistemological frameworks across contexts, create synergy with circumstances, and uphold Christian values while fostering spiritual growth?

Current Christ-centered AI ethics frameworks provide valuable guidance for serving the common good, upholding human dignity, and reflecting Kingdom values in both design and application of AI (Burdett, 2023; Sullivan, 2025). For example, DELTA framework (i.e., dignity, embodiment, love, transcendence, and agency) guides us how to honor human dignity and respect the sacredness of human presence when AI is developed and used (Sullivan, 2025). With these Christ-centered principles, leaders and emerging leaders can respect human dignity; safeguard public trust; and advance societal interests, planetary sustainability, and shared social responsibility (Dignum, 2022; Floridi et al., 2022; Tasioulas, 2022). However, given the need for multiple epistemologies, conscious engagement, and synergy with rapid changing realities in making wise decisions, I propose enriching existing Christian AI ethics frameworks by integrating insights from Eastern wisdom traditions, such as the principle of *wu-wei* (i.e., effortless action).

Wu-wei entails an ideal state characterized by skillfulness and moral integrity. It embodies a sense of effortless action—either acting or not acting. This idea is linked to existing literature on mindfulness, the flow experience, neuroscience, and spiritual growth (Barrett, 2011; Chia & Holt, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Slingerland, 2000). *Wu-wei* is a phenomenology of individuals who perform effortlessly and spontaneously while acting on knowledge aligned with the *Way* and *De* (Chia & Holt, 2007; Slingerland, 2000). *Wu-wei* will help leaders to unlearn and empty out the knowledge they may glean from AI (Eshelman et al., 2012; Vaill, 1989). This state of *wu-wei* is also described as "flow" in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) empirical studies on optimal professional experience. "The *wu-wei* attitudes of seeking synergy, patience, acceptance

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of emergent events, and embedding oneself in situations rather than abstracting oneself from them are essential for effective performance" (Vaill, 1989, p. 188).

Wu-wei is often described as a water-like leadership style, embodying the Daoist principle of effortless action (Auzoult, 2021). It encourages leaders to immerse themselves in the natural flow of events, practicing active nonaction—an intentional form of responsiveness rather than passivity. Leaders guided by *wu-wei* accept themselves and others without judgment, embracing authenticity and harmony. They embody the rhythms of nature within their leadership, where tranquility and emptiness serve as foundations for spontaneous, effective action. Such integration with Christian AI ethics framework and *wu-wei* calls Christian business educators to cultivate presence, awe, and gratitude among our students when they can experience God's presence amid life's complexities in their embodied knowledge.

This paper argues that when leaders embrace *wu-wei*, a Taoist principle of effortless action that fosters epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility, they will develop collective consciousness and spiritual resilience for Christ Kingdom (Auzoult, 2021). With the increasing self-awareness and collective consciousness, Christian leaders will undergo a relational transformation and become more Christ-like. They are encouraged to envision alternative ecosystems that promote human flourishing while enhancing their critical digital literacy. In this paper, I build on extensive literature reviews about *wu-wei*, AI social-technological systems, and reflections on my 30 years of leadership development in higher education and business (Lam, 2011, 2024a, 2024c). This article proceeds with three sections: (a) *wu-wei* philosophy and *wu-wei* management as a metaphor, (b) the relationship between *wu-wei* and Christ-centered AI ethical framework, and (c) *wu-wei* practices that cultivate wise Christ-centered leaders.

Wu-Wei Philosophy and *Wu-Wei* Management as a Metaphor

The concept of *wu-wei* is somewhat ineffable. Wu-wei can be a process and represents an ideal moral and spiritual state of being where the practitioner attains perfect skills to cope with various situations and perform effortlessly and spontaneously, as valued in traditional Chinese culture (Barrett, 2011). "*Wu-wei* embodies the perfection of a unique and ultimate skill: the skill of becoming a fully realized human being and embodying the *Way* in all actions" (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). Barrett (2011) described *wu-wei* as "a special kind of action and a way of life based on the regular practice of that kind of action: an effortless way of comporting oneself in the world with supreme harmony or efficacy" (p. 681). *Wu-wei* can be characterized by four key elements: (a) fine-tuned responsiveness and skill, (b) nondeliberative spontaneity, (c) effortlessness, and (d) enjoyment. The idea of *wu-wei* wisdom is a form of learned ignorance and is one unlearning traditional Eastern wisdom. It is attained by "emptying out" or "unlearning" (Chia & Holt, 2007).

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People can realize their potential without losing their human abilities, control, and responsibilities when they are aligned with the *Way* and *De* in all actions, including AI and human collaboration tasks (Chia & Holt, 2007; Slingerland, 2000). Yearley (1996) noted that perfectly executed and skillful activities in *wu-wei* correspond to the traits of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and his colleagues (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). These traits relate to what Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) considered an optimal experience and include (a) intense and focused concentration on the task at hand; (b) merging of action and awareness; (c) loss of reflective self-consciousness; (d) sense of control, or more accurately, a complete absence of anxiety; (e) distorted sense of time; and (f) an experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding (autotelic experience). The flow experience ultimately depends on the individual's perspective, their interests, abilities, and focus of attention. The subjective quality of this flow experience plays a significant role in determining the psychological well-being of the individual.

Wu-wei is an ideal harmonious state, embodying the paradox of virtue, which revolves around the fact that virtue can only be acquired by someone who is not consciously trying to acquire it. Slingerland (2000) cited Jean-Francois Billeter's definition of *wu-wei* as a state of "perfect knowledge of the reality of the situation, perfect efficaciousness, and the realization of a perfect economy of energy" (p. 300). *Wu-wei* can refer to the state of the mind of the actor. It does not refer to observable actions themselves. It is about the phenomenological state of the doer and the spiritual state of the doer at the moment of action. *Wu-wei* represents the perfection of a unique and ultimate skill—the skill of becoming a fully realized human being and embodying the *Way* in all actions. Thus, *wu-wei* should be seen as a spiritual ideal when a being is harmonized with the objective and normal order of the cosmos. Slingerland described that for a person in *wu-wei:*

> proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell, with the same unconscious ease and joy with which the body moves to the rhythm of a song. This state of harmony integrates complex cognitive and somatic elements, involving the body, emotions, and mind. Unlike instinctual or habitual actions, *wu-wei* requires a high degree of concentration and allows for considerable flexibility of response (p. 300).

Wu-wei management serves as a metaphor for "a kind of non-principled, non-justified, unthought-out, and non-calculated action" (Vaill, 1989, p. 182). It allows our consciousness to operate as an integral part of our circumstances (Vaill, 1989, p. 183). *Wu-wei* practitioners or doers seek to "maintain the unity of time, the unity of thought and action, and the unity of self and environment" (Vaill, 1989, p. 186). The *wu-wei* attitude emphasizes qualities essential for effective performance, including the search for synergy, patience, acceptance of emergent events, and the tendency to immerse

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oneself in a situation rather than abstracting from it (Vaill, 1989, p. 188). Actions taken in a *wu-wei* state appear effortless and instinctive. Indeed, individuals act when conditions are appropriate and without delay between thought and action; thought and action occur simultaneously. They calmly execute the purposes of their work with full presence in the existing context. This effortless and instinctive action is defined as *wu-wei*, characterized by a state of being un-self-conscious and at ease.

Practice is defined as "the conscious ability to produce fairly consistent intended results across a range of circumstances. To do this well, one must grow and change to meet the evolving situations in which one exists" (Vaill, 2020). Through the practice of *wu-wei* management, business professionals learn to "flow" with the system and make appropriate changes. This process involves examining their values regarding relationships with themselves, others, and the external environment. Through learning, they come to understand that their best choices in specific situations are temporal. They develop their learning methods and determine what to focus on to consistently deliver results in diverse circumstances and strive to live fully as human beings.

To practice *wu-wei*, we must develop the necessary skills. Our effortless actions arise from a wealth of embodied knowledge, a clear mind, and careful reflection on how to align our actions with our circumstances and self-understanding. The pursuit of *wu-wei* also transforms our being and nurtures our growth as we learn to unlearn and let go throughout this journey. Ultimately, *wu-wei* represents an ideal spiritual state, characterized by spontaneous mastery that aligns with both our situations and the Way of the universe, accompanied by love.

Professionals enhance their expertise by immersing themselves in perceived realities, developing *wu-wei* actions that align with their deep inner consciousness and understanding of context. When transferring their learning to new situations, they must reflect on their cherished values and adapt accordingly. They should recognize their growth and create meaning from the changes they undergo while delivering results across various circumstances. The *wu-wei* actions they take unify thought and action, with their thought being closely linked to individual moral consciousness. This alignment allows them to find deeper meaning in both the results they seek and the changes they make, both externally and internally. Ultimately, the unity of self and environment within *wu-wei* is supported by the development of spiritual and moral character. Those who practice *wu-wei* attract people through greater values; they appear relaxed and deeply absorbed in meaningful pursuits. Slingerland (2014) noted, "true *wu-wei* is a sign of genuine commitment to the activity and its larger framework" (p. 192).

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The Relationships Between *wu-wei* and Christ-Centered AI Ethical Framework

The traditional Chinese wisdom of *wu-wei* encourages leaders to empty themselves and fully immerse themselves in each situation and discover inherent synergy. Achieving this requires unlearning and self-reflection. Leaders must confront their inner fears and habitual interactions with constituencies and materials and be willing to unlearn as situations evolve. By embracing their limitations, anxieties, and the ambiguities inherent in various contexts, they can engage with their followers patiently and humbly. Wise leaders must remain vigilant about the biases embedded in data and the ways information is represented. They determine which tasks are best entrusted to AI and which human capabilities must be cultivated to foster deeper wisdom and sounder judgment. They invest in developing uniquely human skills: empathy, contextual reasoning, critical digital literacy, moral reflection, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. They resist being confined by AI algorithmic designs and intuitively perceive challenges even when data are absent. A *wu-wei*-oriented perspective urges leaders to do the following tasks:

- Resist dehumanization in algorithmic decision making.
- Protect organizational ecosystems as sites of interconnected consciousness.
- Value indigenous wisdom, local perspectives, and tacit forms of knowing.
- Be responsible in the development and implementation of AI in their organizations by developing learning culture that encourages transparency, ethical principles, and accountability in the organizations.

Guided by the practice of *wu-wei*, they immerse themselves in the evolving landscape of AI. They demystify AI through questioning, collaboration, imagination, and the continual rhythm of unlearning and relearning. They embrace their "learned ignorance," cultivating the capacity to imagine and judge beyond the boundaries of AI epistemology. They learn to navigate diverse epistemologies with flexibility (i.e., epistemological flexibility), openness to uncertainty (i.e., epistemological vulnerability), and humility in examining assumptions (i.e., epistemological humility). They discern which epistemology fits a given context and critically interrogate dominant narratives shaping AI-augmented decision making. Through patience, they fine tune their responsiveness and skills, intuitively grasping the essence of complex situations and crafting responsible responses aligned with the vision of Christ's Kingdom, empowered by the Holy Spirit. They embody Christ as their center in all actions, seeking synergy with patience and accepting emerging realities beyond AI's predictive reach. They serve with humility, pursuing justice and peace for many, instead of self-glorification. They nurture trust among various stakeholders through managing collective consciousness and multiple epistemologies with truth and grace. Ultimately, the practice of *wu-wei* integrates Christian consciousness into the fabric of

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reality, enabling leaders to act with wisdom and experience the ideal spiritual and moral state of being with God's help.

Wu-wei Practices That Cultivate Wise Christ-Centered Leaders

Individual leaders need to be humble and embrace their learned ignorance and develop capacities to imagine and judge large quantities of information beyond AI epistemology boundaries. Individually, they should know who they are (i.e., personhood), allow themselves to practice mindfulness in the present moment, and meditate (Eshelman et al., 2012). They ought to know how to empty out of the information provided by AI, fine tune their skills and responsiveness, and grow to deliver consistent results across various situations regardless of AI datasets. They should enjoy the process of practicing and seem to be effortless with nondeliberative spontaneity (i.e., *wu-wei* state). They respect our existence of being humans and expect to become fully human in Christ through the practice of *wu-wei.*

Leaders realize that precision and optimization of human preferences in the AI system are not our human ethics. They provide more time for themselves and their followers to think and connect with Holy Spirit. They would not like to overestimate the effect of technology in the short run or underestimate its effect in the long run. Whether they embrace or apprehend how AI is integrated into their workplace or their lives, they clearly understand our lives are not defined by computer-aggregated data. And because they also know AI is a social-technology system created by human beings with its own epistemological assumptions about what knowledge is, they practice *wu-wei* and empty out the knowledge created by AI with the practice of questioning, collaborating, imagining, and ongoing unlearning and relearning process. They know how to develop excellence through *wu-wei* as a management metaphor. They develop true wisdom from ambiguity and vagueness.

The practice of *wu-wei* in our leadership development will view human beings as "continuously becoming" (Vaill, 1989, p. 137) and enhance leaders' spiritual development (Mirvis, 2008). Leaders should be empowered to examine the operation of consciousness and experience stillness as part of their human development. Such an approach develops leaders' abilities to "live with these ambiguities, and periodically to reconceptualize them" in a world with ambiguity or a high rate of change (Schoemaker, 2008, p. 135). They will know the importance of increasing consciousness of the "inherent contradictions, dilemmas and predicaments of managerial situations" in a proper leadership development process (Chia, 2005, p. 1092). They will learn how to develop stronger empathy toward practitioners and evaluate their performance from their perspectives. In the process, they also learn how to allocate their attention resources properly and practice goodness without possessing them (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). They will be more conscious about their own growth and changes in

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the process of delivering results in a wide range of circumstances in our new AI-driven world.

As management educators facilitate leaders to realize the moment of wonder and joy and practice *wu-wei* in many activities and reflection assignments, students can be fully human and fully embrace their different aspects of their lives. They can become fully functioning people in Christ as we can set aside time to be, to reflect, to access vital life energy in the stage of tranquil stillness, and to grow at a healthy and nurturing pace (Benefiel, 2005; Buscaglia, 1978; Eshelman et al., 2012; Vaill, 1989). They are likely to be thoughtfully engaged in what they do and how they do it. They also develop their capacity to practice *wu-wei*.

Students need to understand the importance of incorporating diverse epistemologies and coming up with effective actions to address the needs of various stakeholders in each situation. These actions are often temporary and represent the best responses in specific contexts. Students must envision the types of learners they will become as they transfer their knowledge from one context to another and adapt to the continuous changes in their professional lives. Students should also be guided to develop certain inquiry-based skills that involve a consciousness of the situation and the alignment of collective perceived realities. They will practice listening with charity and help themselves to observe how their assumptions, norms, and values operate in their inquiry. They can see how their consciousness of the situation will be part of the situation in which they have to act. They will learn how to act appropriately, effortlessly, and spontaneously (i.e., practice *wu-wei*). They should be guided to develop their habits of reflection and learn how to think about their growth and changes when they must deliver results in a wide range of circumstances. They should also be facilitated to seek meanings for their growth and changes in select low-stakes and rewarding reflection assignments.

I propose that it is important to invite and encourage professional management educators, university management students, and management professionals to fully experience *wu-wei* in their own lives and experience a freshness and joy in being present in each classroom or workplace. They are likely to be thoughtfully engaged in what they do and how they do it. They also develop their capacity to practice *wu-wei*. In summary, they learn how to purify their hearts, refine their experiences, empty their thoughts, and immerse themselves in the reality around them such that they can respond effortlessly. They grow and change themselves up to the highest spiritual state when they consciously produce fairly consistent intended results across a range of circumstances.

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Conclusion

AI innovation continues to reshape decision making through unprecedented levels of automation and augmentation. Yet, it cannot replicate the depth, mystery, and relational nature of human consciousness. To navigate this evolving landscape, I propose that leaders embrace *wu-wei*—the Taoist principle of effortless action in the journey of becoming wiser Christian disciples. This practice nurtures epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility, qualities that allow collective consciousness to emerge and enable participants to engage in relational becoming while deepening their spiritual growth for Christ's Kingdom. Through *wu-wei*, Christian consciousness can remain connected to the changing AI ecosystem, fostering experiences of flow and redeemed work. To embark on this journey toward *wu-wei* wisdom, we must purify our hearts, refine our experiences, empty our thoughts, and immerse ourselves in the reality around us. Unlearning our previous successful skills or knowledge in the new context is ironically the path toward genuine wisdom and insight. When leaders immerse themselves in the realities of AI ecosystems, they uphold values such as care, empathy, human dignity, and relational integrity—virtues often overshadowed by AI technology.

As our current social, political, and economic systems are lagging behind rapid AI development, Christians can draw inspiration from *wu-wei* to cultivate critical digital literacy and imagine alternative ecosystems that prioritize human flourishing. In summary, integrating *wu-wei* into Christ-centered AI ethics cultivates epistemological flexibility, vulnerability, and humility. These qualities enable leaders to ethically navigate many disruptive changes, uphold Kingdom values, and envision alternative ecosystems that advance human flourishing, while fostering spiritual growth and critical digital literacy. Wise leaders will deepen their self-awareness and collective consciousness for Christ's Kingdom, grounding wisdom in accumulated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of the minds to the Holy Spirit.

About the Author

Maria Lai-ling Lam, PhD
Chair, International Business Administration Department, LCC International University, Lithuania
Maria Lam holds a Ph.D. in Marketing and Organizational Behavior from George Washington University. She has taught marketing, organizational behavior, leadership, and strategy for over 29 years across the U.S., Hong Kong, and Lithuania. Her research spans U.S.–China business trust, corporate social responsibility, empathy, human flourishing, and AI in higher education. She has published one book and over 100 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. She can be reached at mlam@lcc.lt.

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