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Exploring Effective Employee Engagement Strategies During Times of Crisis in Small Social Assistance Nonprofits

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Andrea Purnell

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Exploring Effective Employee Engagement Strategies During Times of Crisis in Small
Social Assistance Nonprofits

by

Andrea Purnell

MS, Keller Graduate, 2013

BS, DeVry University, 2011

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December, 2024

Abstract

Engaging employees during crises is an important issue in the nonprofit sector, where resource limitations constrain leaders' options. Leaders of small assistance nonprofits are often concerned that disengaged employees may negatively affect productivity and organizational performance. Guided by the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore effective strategies used by leaders of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations. The participants consisted of eight chief officers and executive directors from small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California, all of whom had developed effective strategies to mitigate the negative impact of crises on employee engagement. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and publicly available company documents about employee engagement strategies. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: (1) leadership during crises enhances employee engagement, (2) community and team-building initiatives promote employee well-being and engagement, and (3) organizational resilience and adaptability strengthen engagement. A key recommendation is for nonprofit leaders to use technology innovatively to foster a collaborative community and family-oriented environment. The implications for positive social change include the potential to maintain the continuity of nonprofit operations and support local communities by providing stable services that address critical needs.

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Dedication

To my father, Connie Boatman, whose unwavering belief in leading from within inspires my resilience and vision; though you are no longer with us, your spirit continues to guide me. To my mother, Lorraine Boatman, whose boundless love and prayers have supported me through challenges and instilled the value of knowledge and the importance of never settling for less; and to my future lineage, may you become your ancestors' wildest dreams and carry forward the legacy of knowledge and excellence in all your endeavors.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to God for granting me the strength and perseverance to complete this journey. I dedicate this achievement to the memory of my father, Connie Boatman. Dad, I hope you see this from heaven; your lessons on work ethics and dedication to excellence are the foundation of my success.

To my mother, Lorraine Boatman, thank you for providing me with the best opportunities and for your constant encouragement. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my husband, Terry Purnell, for your unwavering support and steadfast love that has carried me through every high and low.

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This accomplishment would not have been possible without each of you. As I celebrate this milestone, I do so with profound gratitude for those who have supported me here, including my father from above. Your collective encouragement has been the cornerstone of my success in this doctoral journey.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Section 1: Foundation of the Project.....	1
Background of the Problem	1
Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose	2
Research Question	3
Assumptions and Limitations	3
Assumptions.....	3
Limitations	4
Transition	5
Section 2: The Literature Review	6
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Transition	45
Section 3: Research Project Methodology	47
Project Ethics	47
Nature of the Project	51
Population, Sampling, and Participants	53
Data Collection Activities.....	56
Research Instruments	57
Data Collection Procedures.....	58
Interview Questions	61

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques	61
Data Analysis Techniques.....	62
Reliability and Validity.....	66
Reliability.....	67
Validity	68
Transition and Summary.....	71
Section 4: Research Project Methodology	72
Summary of Data Collected in The Study	72
Theme 1: Leadership in Times of Crisis Promotes Employee Engagement	74
Theme 2: Team-Building Fosters Employee Well-Being and Engagement.....	83
Theme 3: Organizational Resilience and Adaptation Foster Engagement	95
Business Contributions and Recommendations for Practice	107
Recommendation 1: Use Technology to Foster Community and Connection	110
Recommendation 2: Reinforce Open-Door Policies in Virtual Settings	110
Recommendation 3: Adapt Communication Styles to Meet Individual Needs.....	111
Implications for Social Change.....	111
Recommendations for Future Research	113
Conclusion	114
References.....	116
Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter	167

Appendix B: Interview Protocol	168
Appendix C: Member Checking Documents	170

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Data Collected in the Study	73
Table 2. Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 1	74
Table 3. Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 2	83
Table 4. Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 3	96

Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

The nonprofit sector in the United States faces unprecedented challenges. Exacerbated by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofit organizational leaders experience challenges retaining donors and finding and receiving private and government funding (Akingbola et al., 2023; Deitrick et al., 2020). The pandemic profoundly affected various aspects of society, including individuals' health, financial stability, education, and access to basic resources (Brammer et al., 2020). Nonprofit leaders shifted their focus toward preserving their workforce during the surge in service demands (Slatten et al., 2021), which is crucial in addressing community needs amid high demand. Consequently, some leaders of small social assistance nonprofits lack effective strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of crises on employee engagement, impeding organizational resilience and hindering service delivery.

Leadership styles adopted by managerial personnel within small social assistance nonprofit organizations are crucial for organizational success amidst the challenges associated with COVID-19. Leadership styles of nonprofit leaders were critical in navigating the difficulties faced by nonprofit organizations during the pandemic (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020; Akingbola, 2020). The National Council of Nonprofits (2023) reported that despite heightened demands for services and programs, staff shortages increased tremendously since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing barriers to service for individuals in low-income communities. Lack of employee engagement can impede organizational resilience and hinder service delivery

(Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020; Akingbola, 2020). Equipping the leaders of small social assistance nonprofits with the resources to mitigate staff shortages, burnout, and lack of engagement is a top priority. Addressing challenges derived from COVID-19 requires effective leadership styles and strategies to maintain employee engagement, organizational resilience, and uninterrupted service delivery to communities.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem was that some leaders of small social assistance nonprofits lacked effective strategies to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore effective strategies used by leaders of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations. The target population was chief officers and executive directors of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California who had developed effective strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of crises on employee engagement. Data was collected from eight purposefully and snowball-sampled nonprofit leaders from the target population.

I interviewed participants using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions designed to elicit the participants' perspectives about employee engagement strategies. I selected participants based on predefined inclusion criteria. The participants were required to be: (a) over 18 years of age, (b) leaders of small social assistance nonprofit organizations, (c) had at least five years of experience as a nonprofit leader, and (d) had implemented successful strategies to engage employees during crises. I accessed participants through recruitment materials posted on social media that included the

study's inclusion criteria so that participants could self-identify as qualified. I also reviewed publicly available company documents for relevant information regarding employee engagement strategies.

I used Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory to guide the study. Transformational leadership theory emphasizes the ability of influential leaders to inspire and motivate their followers (Sharief, 2024). Transformational leaders raise awareness of task significance, encourage the pursuit of higher-level goals, and foster trust and collaboration among team members (Ytterstad & Olaisen, 2023). Adopting transformational leadership principles that promote employee motivation, trust, and collaboration is vital for sustaining service delivery and organizational resilience during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Sinclair, 2023). Transformational leadership theory was an appropriate framework for the study for the analysis of employee engagement strategies during crises.

Research Question

What are the effective strategies that leaders of U.S. small social assistance nonprofits use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Understanding research assumptions in exploring leadership practices in small social assistance nonprofits is vital for conducting research on nonprofit organizations. Research assumptions underpin foundational beliefs and principles guiding a study's design, methodology, and interpretation (Ataro, 2020; Brentnall & Higgins, 2022). I

made three assumptions in the study. My first assumption was that leaders of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California developed strategies to sustain employee engagement during crises. My second assumption was that each participant responded truthfully to all interview questions, ensuring the data collected was reliable. My third assumption was that the participants were truthful about meeting the inclusion criteria and being qualified for the study. I chose chief officers and executive directors as the study's sample to gather insights into diverse, effective leadership styles and strategies for sustaining employee engagement during crises, reflecting the challenges faced by small social assistance nonprofit leaders.

Limitations

Discussing the limitations of a research study enhances the reliability of findings. Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) defined limitations as weaknesses in a study due to an investigator's methodological choices. The validity of participants' experiences is a potential limitation (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). The participants may not have truthfully disclosed their experiences to protect their organizations' reputations, which could impact the reliability of the study's findings. Social desirability bias was another potential limitation, which occurs when participants provide answers aligned with societal norms (Eum et al., 2022; Kurowski, 2019). Informed consent should have mitigated social desirability bias (Ried et al., 2022) because I informed the participants about the measures used to protect their confidentiality. Insufficient information posed another challenge, as incomplete responses can lack the depth needed to support a study's objectives fully, limiting the thoroughness of the analysis (Thomas, 2017). I mitigated the

limitation of insufficient information through member checking, which allowed the research participants to provide clarification and additional information after the interview (see Candela, 2019). Addressing potential biases and ensuring the validity of participants' responses enhances the reliability of the study's findings.

Transition

Section 1 included the foundation for the project, providing insight into the challenges faced by small social assistance nonprofits during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific business problem of the study was that some small social assistance nonprofit leaders need more effective strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of crises on employee engagement, thereby impeding organizational resilience and hindering service delivery. Section 1 included an outline of the nature of the study, including the problem, purpose, and research question. The section also contained a discussion of the study's assumptions and anticipated limitations. Section 2 includes a comprehensive review of the relevant professional and academic literature. Section 3 provides methodological details related to project ethics, data collection and analysis, and considerations for the study's reliability and validity. Section 4 includes a presentation of the study's findings and includes a discussion of implications for business practices, social change, and future research endeavors.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The following section is a review of the literature for the research study. The review includes insight into scholars' studies on employee engagement strategies and organizational resilience. I included 187 references in the literature review section of the study, of which 179 references (96%) were published between 2020 and 2024. One hundred sixty-six (166) articles (89%) were peer-reviewed, of which 162 (98%) were published between 2020 and 2024. Eight sources (4%) were dated before 2020, including four (50%) peer-reviewed articles, three (37%) books, and one (13%) dissertation.

I organized the literature review into four main sections. First, I describe how transformational leadership theory, the study's conceptual framework, applies to employee engagement and organizational resilience in small social assistance nonprofit organizations. I also discuss leader-member exchange as a contrasting theory. In the second main subsection, I describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonprofit organizations in Northern California (Azevedo et al., 2022; Kuenzi et al., 2021). In the third subsection, I explore how nonprofit leaders promote employee engagement by discussing employee engagement, leadership, and motivational strategies. I also discuss resources for engaging employees and how organizational culture impacts employee engagement. The fourth main subsection concerns organization resilience. I describe organizational resilience as a multifaceted phenomenon involving capital, strategic, cultural, relationship, and learning resilience (Chen et al., 2021). I describe the

relationship between employee engagement and organizational resilience and potential strategies nonprofit leaders use to enhance the resilience of their organizations.

Conceptual Framework

Transformational Leadership

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore effective strategies used by leaders of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations. I chose transformational leadership theory to guide the study. Leadership scholars recognize Downton (1973), who delineated its foundational principles, as the pioneer of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership theory distinguishes leaders who establish meaningful and motivating relationships with followers from leaders who rely heavily on transactional methods to achieve positive results (Bass, 1985). The transformational leadership theory outlines four key components that enable leaders to inspire and motivate followers: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders inspire enthusiasm, foster dedication, stimulate innovation, and provide personalized support to followers (Hai et al., 2020). Nonprofit leaders navigating crises like COVID-19 find transformational leadership qualities crucial for engaging employees.

Idealized Influence. The first component of transformational leadership is idealized influence, which helps leaders foster employee engagement and organizational resilience. Idealized influence involves leading by example and describes leaders who are exemplary role models (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Idealized influence has significance in

inspiring and garnering admiration among followers, primarily through a leader's personality and compelling vision (Nevarez et al., 2023). However, some researchers suggest that there are limitations to the effectiveness of charismatic rhetoric during crises. Crisis-responsive charismatic leadership waned more rapidly than idealized influence once a crisis subsided (Davis, 2007). While idealized influence positively influences safety behaviors during crises, its efficacy may depend on followers' crisis perceptions (Giebe et al., 2022). Further research is needed to understand how idealized influence intersects with employees' crisis perceptions to influence leaders' abilities to engage employees and promote organizational resilience in small social assistance nonprofits.

Exploring leaders' use of idealized influence can reveal strategies for fostering employee engagement and organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations.

Transformational leadership can help motivate employees and build resilience (Ding & Wang, 2023; Wang, 2022). The impact of idealized influence may vary across cultural and economic contexts (Mwakajila & Nyello, 2021), emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural and personal nuances. By examining the contextual and community influences on the effectiveness of idealized influence, leaders of small social assistance nonprofits can gain insights into how to lead by example to maintain engaged and resilient teams capable of achieving their vital missions amidst crises.

Intellectual Stimulation. The second component of transformational leadership theory is intellectual stimulation. Intellectual stimulation describes leaders who encourage creativity and innovation by challenging the conventional beliefs of a group (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Intellectual stimulation helps foster employee engagement,

innovation, and organizational effectiveness in nonprofit organizations, particularly amidst evolving circumstances (Nguyen & Pham, 2020). Intellectual stimulation promotes employees' creativity and critical thinking skills (Boamah, 2022). Intellectual stimulation drives creativity and innovation in the workplace.

Intellectual stimulation is significant for nonprofit leaders. Intellectual stimulation can enhance the problem-solving abilities needed to maintain services amid challenges (Nevarez et al., 2023; Ytterstad & Olaisen, 2023). For many nonprofits adopting remote work and technological shifts during the pandemic, leaders' intellectual stimulation promoted autonomy, communication, and flexibility, fostering an engaged and innovative workforce (Boamah, 2022; Nevarez et al., 2023). The long-term impacts of intellectual stimulation on service delivery and employee engagement in nonprofits remain unclear (Santoso et al., 2022). As nonprofit leaders continually adapt to evolving circumstances (Shi et al., 2020), researchers can examine how intellectual stimulation influenced remote work and technological shifts within the context of COVID-19. The study could elucidate strategies for maintaining organizational effectiveness and fostering an engaged workforce.

Individualized Consideration. Individualized consideration, providing personalized support based on follower needs, is the third component of transformational leadership. Leaders should understand employees' unique circumstances when faced with heightened stress during crises (Dwiedienawati et al., 2021; McCombs & Williams, 2021; Purwanto et al., 2021). For small nonprofit leaders, offering individualized attention can be challenging due to limited resources, staff, technology, and communication tools

constraining personalized approaches (Fuller et al., 2023; Hutton et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). Leaders' individualized consideration helps employees feel like valued team members, promoting their engagement (Qalati et al., 2022). Leaders can also use individualized consideration to encourage organizational resilience by recognizing the unique contributions of each employee and motivating employees for further success (Franken et al., 2020). Individualized consideration can assist with employee engagement.

Inspirational Motivation. The fourth tenet of transformational leadership theory is inspirational motivation. Inspirational motivation describes leaders who motivate followers to achieve success by committing to their vision of the organization (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Leaders tend to inspire and motivate others, encouraging team spirit to reach all aspects of an organization's goals (Toseef et al., 2022). Nonprofit organizational leaders can use inspirational motivation to inspire employees to commit to the social goal of the nonprofit (Gomes et al., 2022). Inspirational motivation can be challenging in nonprofit organizations, where employees and leaders often work long hours with reduced salaries compared to other private institutions (Ronquillo et al., 2021). More research is needed to understand how inspirational motivation can help small social assistance nonprofit leaders during crises.

Application of Transformational Leadership Theory to Small Nonprofit Organizations. Transformational leadership can help nonprofit leaders align organizational goals with employees' needs. Non-profit leaders should align their communication strategies with the organization's vision during times of uncertainty and

crisis (Azevedo et al., 2022). Understanding whether employees share the organization's vision before a crisis can help leaders determine how to communicate effectively (Kuenzi et al., 2021). Aligning communication strategies with employees' needs can help leaders engage employees and align organizational interests during non-crisis periods, which can enhance communication efficacy during times of uncertainty (Schaedler et al., 2022). Effective employee engagement can enhance communication, build trust, and foster a sense of purpose among employees within small social assistance nonprofits (Maslikha et al., 2022). Effective leadership, in turn, promotes a collaborative and resilient organizational culture that can effectively navigate challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transformational leadership has applications to nonprofit organizations.

Transformational leadership can enhance employee engagement and organizational resilience within small nonprofit organizations (Kuenzi et al., 2021; Kim, 2020). Scholars and leaders laud transformational leadership for its superiority over transactional styles, especially when employees invest beyond transactions to address clients' needs (Miller & Song, 2023), such as in nonprofit organizations. Transformational leadership in nonprofit organizations can enhance an employee's engagement with the organization's mission and community involvement (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020). Transformational leadership enhances employees' affective commitment and organizational citizenship behavior, promoting a positive work environment (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020). Scholars highlighted the important of transformational leadership globally, as transformational leadership enhanced employees' commitment, work engagement, and

organizational citizenship in social service nonprofits in Italy (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2020). Transformational leadership can enhance nonprofit employees' commitment to their organizations.

Transformational leadership in small nonprofit organizations can promote employee engagement by reducing stress and burnout. Small social assistance nonprofit organizational leaders described employee engagement as a critical concern during global health crises (Kuenzi et al., 2021). The heightened stress and burnout experienced by frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the importance of understanding transformational leadership in the context of nonprofit organizations (Alblihed & Alzghaibi, 2022). Transformational leadership was useful for addressing the stress and burnout of frontline workers during the pandemic (Boamah, 2022). Nonprofit employees similarly experienced heightened stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuenzi et al., 2024). Transformational leadership also reduces stress and job-related burnout in nonprofit employees (Norton, 2022). Leaders can enhance employee engagement by reducing employee stress and burnout in nonprofit organizations.

Transformational leadership can foster organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations. Transformational leadership is significant in environments where employees derive fulfillment from meaningful impact rather than mere financial incentives (Slatten et al., 2021). Transformational leaders promote benefits appealing to nonprofit organization employees, such as opportunities for training, development, and career advancement (Slatten et al., 2021). The collaboration fostered by transformational leaders also enhances organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations (Lasrado &

Kassem, 2021). Leaders can use inspirational motivation to promote organizational resilience by inspiring employees to exceed their own and organizational expectations, benefiting the communities nonprofits serve (Mumford et al., 2023). Transformational leadership can enhance organizational resilience through employee engagement and motivation.

Inspirational motivation and idealized influence are critical for employee engagement. Inspirational motivation and charisma drive employee engagement, enhance organizational resilience, and help achieve overall objectives (Koomson et al., 2022). Future researchers could examine the complex relationship between inspirational motivation, idealized influence, individualized consideration, and their specific impact on employee engagement within small social assistance nonprofit organizations (Ding & Wang, 2023). By understanding how leaders manifest transformational leadership components within the nonprofit sector, researchers can shed light on how leaders motivate employees to achieve common goals and maintain a resilient organizational culture. Specifically, focusing on how transformational leadership contributes to employee engagement in small social assistance nonprofits may reveal strategies and practices leaders use to foster employee engagement and promote organizational resilience. Although studies suggest that transformational leadership is effective in small organizations, further investigation is needed to understand how transformational leadership intersects different cultural and economic contexts in nonprofit organizations (Mwakajila & Nyello, 2021). Research into how transformational leadership influences nonprofit leaders' ability to engage employees is timely.

Contrasting Theory: Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory contrasts with the transformational leadership theory. LMX theory suggests that leaders and followers develop unique relationships based on social exchanges (Thrasher et al., 2020). The quality of the leader-follower relationship influences followers' behaviors and attitudes and affects performance (Coleman & Donoher, 2022). LMX describes how leaders develop lasting connections with followers, involving a strong foundation of trust, liking, and mutual respect (Toseef et al., 2022). The trust and mutual respect included in LMX theory is similar to transformational leaders who help motivate employees through individualized consideration (Bass, 1985). Leaders who use LMX form considerable bonds with their employees.

LMX theory differs from transformational leadership theory and other leadership theories. LMX emphasizes the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Under LMX theory, not all followers are treated equally, as leaders develop different relationships with individual employees (Liang et al., 2022). Leaders who use LMX theory can create in-groups and out-groups within an organization (Buengeler et al., 2021). LMX theory contrasts with transformational leaders, who promote team-oriented actions towards a common goal or vision (Bass, 1985). LMX theory differs from transformational leadership theory in how leaders develop team goals and visions.

Scholars used the LMX theory to understand employees' performance in nonprofit organizations. Using LMX concepts in human services nonprofits serving

people with disabilities could increase employee performance due to perceptions of trust, mutual respect, and positive communication and interactions (Montorio-Archer, 2021). High-quality LMX relationships can also enhance employee performance by increasing organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Mumtaz & Rowley, 2020). Leaders can use LMX theory to enhance employee performance in nonprofits.

Leaders' use of LMX theory increases employee engagement in nonprofit organizations. Employees perceived greater organizational support from leaders who use LMX, leading to increased organizational commitment and engagement of nonprofit employees (Akingbola et al., 2023). Leaders' use of LMX theory can lead to employee engagement, as leaders stimulate employees' personal and professional growth (Wagner & Koob, 2022). Nonprofit leaders who use LMX can increase employee engagement.

LMX theory has weaknesses that can be challenging in nonprofit organizations. Leader-member exchanges are not always equal, leading to in-groups and out-groups (Liang et al., 2022). Developing in-groups can erode trust among other organization members, undermining followers' perceptions of the leader's effectiveness (Kirk et al., 2022). Forming different employee groups can also polarize a workplace and undermine cohesiveness (Baldassarri & Page, 2021). Nonprofit organizations require workplace cohesiveness to promote community cohesion effectively (Karner et al., 2024). While LMX shares important similarities with transformational leadership theory, LMX was not chosen as a theoretical lens for the study due to characteristics that misalign with the goals of nonprofit organizations.

Impact of the Global Health Crisis on Nonprofit Organizations

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for nonprofit organizations in Northern California, necessitating rapid adaptation to unprecedented circumstances. Northern California ranked as having the twelfth-highest COVID-19 cases in the United States, underscoring the urgency of understanding its effects on nonprofit organizations (Webeck, 2020). Nonprofit leaders grappled with surging service demands and declining revenues, making difficult decisions about staffing and services to sustain their missions and resilience in the face of threats to employee safety and well-being (Azevedo et al., 2022; Kuenzi et al., 2021). The challenges faced by small social assistance nonprofit organizations and their employees during the pandemic accentuate the need for strategic responses and comprehensive support mechanisms to ensure organizational resilience and employee well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to nonprofit organizations regarding employee well-being and job losses. Approximately 1.6 million nonprofit employees lost their jobs during the first 3 months of the pandemic (Salamon & Newhouse, 2020). Job losses compounded pressure on nonprofit leaders and organizations, resulting in financial strains and restricted service availability (Kuenzi et al., 2021). Financial constraints and service delivery limitations necessitated strategic responses to mitigate the adverse impacts of crises on communities (Shi et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of identifying factors influencing organizational resilience to ensure the survival and efficaciousness of nonprofit organizations.

Reduced employee commitment often hinders organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations. Decreased employee commitment resulted from increased demand for extrinsic rewards in the nonprofit sector, exacerbated by financial stressors during the pandemic (Akkermans et al., 2020; Newby & Branyon, 2021). The adverse effects of the global health crisis on employee well-being, coupled with pay and benefit reductions, further compounded the issue of employee engagement (Akkermans et al., 2020; Kuenzi et al., 2021; Walk et al., 2020). Competitive salaries and benefits are essential for supporting employees in organizations that historically serve vulnerable community members disproportionately affected by crises in the United States (Kantamneni, 2020). Nonprofit leaders should address employee engagement and organizational resilience, which are ongoing threats to the sustainability of nonprofit organizations.

Northern California. Various factors make the West Coast optimal for the study. Northern California was among the first to experience community transmission of COVID-19 in the United States (California Nonprofits, 2023). California communities and small social assistance nonprofit organizations dealt with the pandemic and its aftermath longer than other United States regions (see Holliday et al., 2020). Nonprofit leaders in the region likely implemented diverse responses and adaptations, making Northern California a valuable location to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership strategies.

California is also apt for the study due to the density of nonprofit organizations in the state. California contains 30,781 nonprofit organizations that employ 1.65 million

employees (California Employment Development Department, 2022). Northern California experienced increased poverty rates during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 11.7% to 13.2% (Bell et al., 2023). Child poverty also rose from 9.0% in 2021 to 13.8% in 2023 (Public Policy Institute of California, 2024). Government safety net programs help reduce poverty, but the state has regional differences in poverty reduction. For example, safety net programs reduce poverty in inland areas but not as effectively in Northern California (Public Policy Institute of California, 2024). Social poverty heightened community members' demand for services provided by small social assistance nonprofits. The effectiveness of services provided by small social assistance nonprofits heavily relies on employee engagement (Bakker, 2022). Studying strategies implemented by nonprofit leaders in Northern California can provide valuable insights into how other nonprofit leaders can maintain service delivery and sustain employee engagement.

Nonprofit organizations in California experienced challenges during the pandemic. Many nonprofit leaders required additional workforce and human and financial support to maintain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stewart et al., 2021). The pandemic significantly impacted nonprofit operations, increasing service demand while revenues declined, necessitating leaders to make tough decisions (Intindola & Burke-Kolehmainen, 2023). Leaders made decisions about staffing, layoffs, and changes to community services (Kuenzi et al., 2021). The limited information available about the COVID-19 pandemic and individuals' well-being exacerbated the challenges faced by nonprofit leaders and employees, increasing difficulties associated with

attending to the needs of the local community (Kuenzi et al., 2021). Northern California nonprofit leaders faced challenges that were not experienced by nonprofit leaders in other regions of the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected nonprofit organizations in California compared to other U.S. regions. Surveys conducted by the National Council of Nonprofits (2023) across 1,600 small nonprofits in California indicated that 80% of California nonprofits reported job vacancies, attributing 40% of vacancies to employee burnout. According to the same report, 77.3% of the 1,600 nonprofit organizations identified staffing shortages as the primary cause of reduced service delivery (National Council of Nonprofits, 2023). Employee engagement profoundly impacts organizational resilience and service delivery, highlighting the urgent need for further exploration of strategies to mitigate such challenges.

Small Social Assistance Nonprofits. Nonprofit organizations come in various sizes and have varying organizational missions, addressing different aspects of community needs. Social assistance nonprofit organizations provide social services to the public that the government or other public resources fall short of providing (Faulk et al., 2021). Small social assistance nonprofit organizations are classified as 501(c) (3) entities with 100 or fewer employees that do not distribute any income or profits to members, directors, or nonprofit officers (Law Insider, 2023). Services rendered include components of education, healthcare, mental health services, housing, job training, child services, and community maintenance (Faulk et al., 2021). Small social assistance nonprofits provide essential assistance to communities and individuals without resources

to maintain a healthy standard of living (Peters, 2020). Small social assistance nonprofits provide essential services to communities in need.

Social services nonprofit organizations are vital to addressing the diverse needs of individuals and communities by providing a wide range of essential services. Social service nonprofits engage with various human resources, including professionals and volunteers, to offer services to different community groups and manage activities with funding from multiple sources (Xu, 2024). Social services nonprofit employees engage with the community by assisting with healthcare, mental health services, housing, adoption and child services, and community management (Alegria et al., 2023). By leveraging the skills and expertise of their human resources and effectively managing their funding streams, organizational leaders are better prepared to promote service continuity and support the well-being of their communities, even in the face of unprecedented challenges such as national health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Services offered by human services nonprofits encompass a broad spectrum of areas, each designed to address specific needs within communities. Some services include providing food banks, homeless shelters, youth services, and legal aid (Roubenoff et al., 2023). Social services nonprofit employees commonly deliver direct services such as family counseling, substance abuse support, and employment assistance, which are essential for promoting the well-being and stability of individuals and families (Lu et al., 2023). To fund crucial programs, social service nonprofit organizations typically rely on financial support from federal and state governments through grants, contracts, insurance reimbursements, and voucher payments (Allard & Pelletier, 2023). By securing and

effectively managing diverse funding streams, human services nonprofit leaders can sustain organizational operations and continue to provide vital services to individuals in need, ultimately contributing to the overall resilience and well-being of their communities.

Employee Engagement Strategies

Employees' motivations in non-profit and for-profit sectors likely influence employee engagement differently. Leaders can address employee engagement by prioritizing social rewards tailored to the intrinsic values inherent in nonprofit work (Stater & Stater, 2019). Vigor, dedication, and absorption characterize employee engagement (Akingbola et al., 2023). Vigor reflects high energy and mental resilience, dedication encompasses meaning, enthusiasm, and challenge, and absorption denotes a state of deep focus and concentration (Akingbola et al., 2023). Employees' enthusiasm, vigor, and dedication manifest in employee engagement to achieve organizational goals and success (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020). I examine four employee engagement strategies: (a) fostering internal communication, (b) participatory decision-making, (c) use of social media, and (d) promoting coworker and supervisor support.

Fostering Internal Communication. Fostering internal communication is crucial for enhancing employee engagement during crises. Internal communication is significant for strengthening employee engagement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Santoso et al., 2022). Effective communication channels and practices help maintain trust, transparency, and a sense of unity among employees, which is essential for sustaining engagement levels during crises (Santoso et al., 2022). By prioritizing internal

communication, organizational leaders can navigate the challenges of crises while keeping their employees informed, connected, and motivated (Heide & Simonsson, 2021). Internal communication provides a foundation for employee engagement and motivation by keeping employees abreast of critical information during crisis situations.

Transparent internal communication practices help build trust, engagement, and organizational resilience amidst challenges. Transparent internal communication in times of crisis is essential in the nonprofit sector (J. Li et al., 2021; Rys, 2024). Transparent communication enhances employee trust in an organization, fosters engagement towards the brand, and strengthens the relationship between employees and the organization (J. Li et al., 2021). An open and honest approach to communication is particularly valuable during crises by helping employees feel informed, valued, and connected to the organization's mission and goals (Rys, 2024). Leaders can enhance employee engagement by fostering internal communication that builds trust and connectedness.

Symmetrical internal communication is essential during crisis-induced organizational changes. Symmetrical internal communication is a two-way communication approach characterized by active listening and timely responses to employees' needs and concerns (Sun et al., 2021). Symmetrical communication helps prevent and clarify workplace rumors, enhancing employees' perceived quality of change communication and overall engagement (Lee & Kim, 2021). By fostering a symmetrical dialogue between leadership and employees, organizational leaders can effectively address concerns, gather feedback, and maintain a sense of trust and transparency during

times of uncertainty (Erickson, 2021). Symmetrical internal communication may enhance employee engagement during crises.

Effective internal communication strategies correlate with high levels of employee engagement. Employees reported greater engagement when leaders used two-way communication and multiple communication channels (Kimani, 2024). Internal crisis communication practices that promote organizational transparency and support mitigate employees' uncertainty, negative emotions, and job disengagement during crises (Ruppel et al., 2022). By implementing a comprehensive and targeted internal communication strategy, organizational leaders can effectively navigate crises while maintaining high levels of employee engagement and fostering a sense of resilience and unity among their workforce (Krishna, 2022; Santoso et al., 2022). Effective internal communication between leaders and employees can promote employee engagement.

Participatory Decision-Making. Participatory decision-making is a second employee engagement strategy. Implementing a participatory decision-making approach can enhance employee engagement in small nonprofits during times of crisis (Baran & Sypniewska, 2020). Using participatory decision-making can help nonprofit organizations effectively address the concerns of their employees during a crisis (Geekiyana et al., 2020). The participatory decision-making approach aligns with the findings of several studies that highlight its effectiveness in enhancing employee engagement during crises. Work meaningfulness can mitigate the negative effects of crises on work engagement, and involving employees in decision-making can enhance their sense of meaningful contribution to the organization (J. Li et al., 2021). By

involving employees in decision-making processes, small nonprofit leaders foster a sense of ownership and commitment among staff, leading to increased engagement and resilience during challenging times (Slatten et al., 2021). Participatory decision-making can enhance employee engagement.

Participatory decision-making can extend beyond leaders to HR departments and professionals. Redesigning HR practices and improving employee psychological well-being and empowerment can enhance employee engagement during crises, highlighting the importance of engaging employees in decision-making to foster a supportive and empowering work environment (Rahi, 2023). Sharing decision-making power helps build relationships, facilitates a culture of learning, and increases employees' sense of belonging (Moldow, 2023). By involving employees in decision-making processes, nonprofit leaders create a collaborative and inclusive work environment that promotes engagement and commitment, even in times of crisis.

Use of Social Media. Social media platforms are also valuable tools for engaging employees in small social assistance nonprofit organizations during crises. Nonprofit social service organizational leaders can leverage Facebook and Twitter to engage stakeholders for effective communication and engagement (Campbell & Lambright, 2020). Nonprofit organizations increasingly use social media to enhance their communication strategies, allowing small nonprofits to reach a broader audience and engage with stakeholders effectively, including employees (Xue et al., 2024). Social media provides a platform for nonprofit leaders to share updates, stories, and resources with their employees, volunteers, and the wider community (Amelia & Dewi, 2021). By

maintaining open and transparent communication through social media, nonprofit leaders can foster a sense of connection and belonging among their employees (Smith, 2023). Leaders can use social media to celebrate achievements, recognize employee contributions, and showcase the impact of the organization's work, further enhancing employee morale and engagement (Men et al., 2023). Leaders can use social media to foster employee engagement.

Promoting Coworker and Supervisor Support. Nonprofit leaders can enhance employee engagement by promoting coworker and supervisor support. Coworker support and work engagement positively mediated the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and work outcomes during the pandemic (Karani et al., 2022). Leaders fostering a supportive work environment and ensuring employees feel engaged facilitate better organizational outcomes (Schaufeli, 2021). Psychological contract fulfillment correlated with work attitudes and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, with perceived organizational support influencing employee engagement (Yu, 2024). Leaders of small social assistance nonprofit organizations who prioritize coworker support enhance employee engagement and overall well-being.

Supportive supervisor behavior is crucial for enhancing employee engagement in nonprofit organizations. Supportive supervisors foster employee engagement, leading to positive behaviors such as helping others in the workplace (Zhu et al., 2024). Supportive supervisors demonstrate empathy, provide constructive feedback, and create opportunities for growth and development (Yu, 2024). Transformational leaders exude leadership characteristics consistent with supportive supervisor behavior (Lewa et al.,

2022). Small social assistance nonprofit leaders can enhance employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment by incorporating supportive supervisor behavior and fostering a culture of support and trust.

Leadership Styles to Enhance Employee Engagement

Leaders of nonprofit organizations can use various leadership styles to enhance employee engagement during crises. Transformational leadership, the study's conceptual framework, is one such style (Meng et al., 2022). Researchers ascertained that transformational leadership is valuable in addressing employee concerns during crises (McCombs & Williams, 2021; Yücel, 2021). Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating employees, fostering innovation, and creating a supportive work environment, which is crucial during challenging times (Thanh & Quang, 2022). Kwan (2023) noted that Researchers linked transformational leadership to increased employee performance and reduced turnover intentions, essential for organizational stability during crises (Kwan, 2023). Other types of leadership styles, including transactional and servant leadership, can also enhance employee engagement (Jiang & Shen, 2023). Each leadership style has its own unique benefits in creating a positive environment where employees feel motivated and valued. Leaders' leadership styles should suit their employees generally and during crises.

Transactional Leadership. Nonprofit leaders commonly use transactional leadership. Transactional leadership focuses on exchanging resources, knowledge, and skills between leaders and employees (Abdelwahed et al., 2023). Transactional leaders prioritize individual interests and use extrinsic motivation to achieve organizational goals

(Nguyen et al., 2022). Transactional leaders set clear expectations, have direct communication styles, and tend to be results-driven, which leads to productive nonprofit workplaces (Khurram & Hasan, 2023). Leaders of nonprofit organizations can use transactional leadership to enhance organizational outcomes.

Transactional leadership can enhance employee performance in nonprofit organizations. Transactional leadership enriched with public values effectively motivates public service and nonprofit employees (Nguyen et al., 2022). Transactional leadership promotes organizational citizenship behavior, affective commitment, and work engagement (Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2020). The goal-oriented nature of transactional leaders enhances employee engagement with their specific tasks and goals (Nielsen et al., 2019). Transactional leadership may enhance employee engagement in nonprofit organizations.

Servant Leadership. Nonprofit leaders may find servant leadership beneficial in promoting employee engagement during crises. Servant leaders focus on empowering employees, organizing tasks effectively, and sustaining team performance, vital to maintaining employee engagement and productivity in challenging circumstances (Zada et al., 2022). Researchers correlated servant leadership with enhanced organizational commitment and work engagement through organizational identification (Gomes et al., 2022). Servant leadership emphasizes ethical decision-making, employee well-being, and fostering a sense of belonging within the organization (Daniels, 2021). Servant leadership can enhance employee engagement.

Scholars found a relationship between servant leadership and reduced employee burnout, particularly in high-stress environments. By creating a psychologically safe environment and demonstrating care for employees, servant leaders can help mitigate burnout and enhance employee well-being (Ma et al., 2021). Servant leadership also correlated with encouraging extra-role behaviors and work engagement among employees in nonprofit organizations (Aboramadan et al., 2022). Servant leaders foster a sense of employee safety and appreciation, leading to increased engagement and commitment to organizational goals (Lv et al., 2022). The positive impact of servant leadership on employee well-being can promote employee engagement during crises.

Addressing Employees' Uncertainties During Unknown Circumstances

Addressing employees' uncertainties in social assistance nonprofits during crises requires a nuanced approach considering the unique challenges faced by small social assistance nonprofit organizations. Effective leaders address employees' uncertainties during unknown circumstances. Leaders in small nonprofits had heightened responsibilities and demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, including coordinating emergency response, securing funding, and ensuring organizational survival (McCombs & Williams, 2021). Increased demand for nonprofit services limited leaders' time and capacity for providing adequate individualized attention to each employee's needs (Hinojosa et al., 2020). Individualized consideration within transformational leadership can address employees' needs but may not yield comprehensive insights applicable across various crisis contexts like the pandemic (Mathende & Karim, 2022). Leaders may

need to invoke other mechanisms to address employees' uncertainties during unknown circumstances.

Leaders can use crisis communication to address employees' uncertainties during unknown circumstances. Crisis communication refers to the technologies, systems, and protocols that enable organizational leaders to communicate effectively during a major threat or emergency (Carreras-Coch et al., 2022). Crisis communication and effective information dissemination during rapidly evolving situations like COVID-19 critically influence employee engagement (Einwiller et al., 2021). Informed employees may remain calm and engaged with their organizations during crises (Stranzl et al., 2021). Crisis communication can influence employee engagement during times of crisis.

Motivation Strategies to Enhance Employee Engagement

Researchers found a relationship between employee engagement and motivation. Employee engagement correlates with motivation and vice versa (Ghosh et al., 2020). I explore two approaches to employee motivation strategies that can enhance employee engagement: (a) addressing Maslow's hierarchy of needs and (b) applying Alderfer's existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG) theory. Addressing Maslow's hierarchy of needs increases employee engagement in nonprofits (Shaw, 2022). Leaders using Alderfer's ERG theory also promote employee engagement in nonprofits (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). I now consider Maslow's and Alderfer's motivation strategies.

Addressing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a robust framework for understanding employee motivations. Nonprofit leaders can effectively motivate and engage their teams during challenging circumstances by

understanding and addressing employees' needs at different levels of Maslow's hierarchy (Burris, 2023). During crises, employees experience heightened stress and uncertainty, impacting their motivation and engagement (Demerouti & Bakker, 2022). By applying Maslow's theory, nonprofit leaders can engage employees by first prioritizing employees' basic physiological and safety needs, ensuring access to essential resources and a safe work environment (Nguyen et al., 2020). Fulfillment of employees' basic needs enhances employee engagement.

As a crisis progresses, leaders can next focus on addressing employees' higher-level needs, such as belongingness and esteem. Leaders can create a sense of community and belonging within the organization by recognizing employees' contributions and providing opportunities for growth and development (Zaid, 2024). Such actions can fulfill employees' social needs and enhance their sense of belonging and esteem (Waller, 2020). Leaders of social assistance organizations can enhance employees' engagement during crises by empowering employees to take on new challenges, contribute meaningfully to the organization's mission, and develop professionally (Kwan, 2023). By understanding and applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs, nonprofit leaders can effectively support their employees' well-being and maintain high levels of engagement.

The highest level in Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization. Nonprofit leaders of small social assistance organizations can inspire employees to reach their full potential by aligning organizational goals with employees' self-actualization needs (Nguyen et al., 2020). Encouraging creativity, autonomy, and innovation and providing opportunities for personal and professional growth help employees find purpose and fulfillment in their

work (Sutarto et al., 2022). Leaders can foster a culture of continuous learning, development, and empowerment to enhance employees' self-actualization, allowing employees to overcome obstacles, adapt to change, and remain engaged during times of crisis (Zacher et al., 2023). Leaders can cultivate an engaged workforce by creating an environment that supports employees' self-actualization and aligns their personal goals with the organization's mission.

Applying Alderfer's ERG Theory. Alderfer's ERG theory is another framework for understanding and addressing employees' core needs in small social assistance nonprofits during crises. ERG theory builds upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs by emphasizing existence, relatedness, and growth needs (Moosa & Aloka, 2023). Employees often face heightened stress and uncertainty during crises, impacting their motivation and engagement levels (George & Thomas, 2023). By focusing on needs related to existence, relatedness, and growth, nonprofit leaders can create a supportive work environment that enhances employee engagement. Addressing needs related to existence, such as job security and fair compensation, provides stability and reassurance to employees facing uncertainty (Demerouti & Bakker, 2022). Fostering relatedness through interpersonal relationships and teamwork promotes a sense of belonging and cohesion within the organization that enhances engagement (Rhee & Kim, 2024). Supporting growth needs by offering opportunities for learning, skill development, and career advancement can further increase employee motivation and engagement, contributing to a resilient and dedicated workforce (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2023). By

prioritizing aspects of Alderfer's ERG theory, nonprofit leaders can effectively address the business problem of enhancing employee engagement during crises.

Alderfer's ERG theory offers nonprofit leaders a structured approach to engage employees by focusing on employee well-being during crises. Leaders can significantly enhance engagement and commitment by addressing employees' fundamental needs and providing steadfast support in times of uncertainty (van Wynen & Niemandt, 2020). Cultivating a workplace environment that emphasizes employee welfare and fosters a cohesive community is crucial for maintaining robust engagement amid challenging circumstances (Einwiller et al., 2021). Adopting inclusive leadership practices, prioritizing psychological safety, and fostering belonging further strengthens employee engagement (Zaid, 2024). By leveraging Alderfer's ERG theory, nonprofit leaders can effectively navigate the complexities of crisis management.

Resources to Enhance Employee Engagement During Crises

Leaders can use numerous resources to enhance employee engagement. Some examples in the literature, including professional development programs and team-building exercises, can be challenging to implement during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). I specifically explore two resources that could be implemented during crises: mental health resources and peer support groups and wellness programs.

Mental Health Resources. Leaders should offer mental health resources to address employee engagement during times of crisis. Mental health resources can enhance employee engagement across various organizations (Sharma & Kumra, 2020).

Leaders can alleviate employees' psychological challenges by providing mental health support programs, including online mental health assistance or counseling (Liu et al., 2021). Integrating mental health into the purview of occupational health is a newer approach that could combat the historical limitations of mental health programs, emphasizing the importance of engaging employees by supporting their mental well-being (Brown-Johnson et al., 2024). The association of social factors and COVID-19-related resource loss with depression and anxiety underscores the importance of addressing mental health concerns to support employees' well-being and engagement (Pagorek-Eshel et al., 2022). Providing mental health resources can enhance employee engagement by prioritizing their well-being.

Peer Support Groups and Wellness Initiatives. During times of crisis, small social assistance nonprofit leaders can enhance employee engagement and organizational resilience by implementing peer support groups and wellness initiatives focused on stress management. Peer support groups provide a platform for employees to connect, share experiences, and offer mutual encouragement, fostering a sense of community and support (Pichler et al., 2023). Peer support groups promote behavioral adaptation and stress reappraisal, which can protect employees' psychological health during crisis events (Pichler et al., 2023). A sense of community and support directly contributes to employee engagement by creating a positive work environment where employees feel valued and connected to their colleagues. By helping employees better manage stress and adapt to challenging situations, peer support groups increase employees' capacity to remain engaged and productive in their work. Wellness initiatives focusing on stress

management techniques, such as mindfulness practices and mental health workshops, help employees cope with stress and anxiety, increasing job satisfaction and engagement (Zerden et al., 2022). Addressing employee wellness can impact employees' engagement when resources and staff are stretched thin.

Organizational leaders can stimulate employee organizational citizenship behaviors and engagement by focusing on mental health and resilience during crises, which is especially important for small social assistance nonprofits facing undue stress. Supportive relationships are essential in the workplace, noting that workplace social support, including peer support, enhances employee work engagement (Nagata et al., 2022). Offering mental health resources, such as peer group supervision and stress management training, can help resolve work stress among employees and promote well-being (Murayama et al., 2022). Mental health and peer support interventions can enhance employee engagement by equipping staff with the tools to manage workplace challenges effectively, increasing employees' confidence and motivation to contribute to the organization's goal. Small nonprofit leaders can foster a more engaged and resilient workforce by prioritizing employee mental health and creating a supportive work environment.

Organizational Culture and Employee Engagement

The intersection of work-from-home arrangements, employee engagement, and organizational culture during crises presented a complex challenge for nonprofit leaders in the social assistance sector. Managing work-from-home and social aspects of organizational culture is critical in enhancing employee engagement during crises, as

organizational culture forms the foundation for engagement strategies (Ababneh, 2021). Crises render organizational culture most visible and malleable, providing leaders with opportunities to reinforce or reshape cultural norms (Schein & Schein, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated work-from-home arrangements, compelling nonprofit leaders to adapt organizational culture to support engagement in distributed work environments. Domestic factors impacted remote workers, emphasizing the need for a culture that acknowledges work-life boundary blurring (Galanti et al., 2021). Remote work enhances work-life balance and reduces job stress (Irawanto et al., 2021). Nonprofit leaders can cultivate a culture of flexibility and understanding to help employees navigate uncertainty and maintain engagement, particularly in social assistance organizations where employees face heightened emotional demands.

Nonprofit leaders can use organizational culture to support employee engagement by celebrating employees' successes. Celebrating employees' successes can enhance employee engagement, especially during times of crisis (Bridger, 2022). Celebrating successes promotes company culture by fostering a sense of pride, organizational identification, and job satisfaction among employees (Yue et al., 2021). In crisis situations, recognizing achievements becomes even more critical when morale may be low and uncertainty high. Employees in nonprofit organizations often perceive the organization's success as their own, leading to increased job satisfaction (Bakotić, 2022). An alignment of personal goals with the organization's goals can enhance employees' commitment and engagement, providing stability and purpose during turbulent times (Gomes et al., 2022). Employees' sense of pride in the organization can motivate them to

identify with the organization, further strengthening their connection to the nonprofit and potentially buffering against the negative impacts of crises (Abdullah et al., 2022).

Recognizing employees' accomplishments can help increase employee engagement.

Boosting morale and job satisfaction and recognizing and celebrating employees' successes can create a resilient organizational culture capable of weathering challenges.

Recognizing employees' accomplishments can help nurture employee relations, which is crucial in nonprofit organizations where leaders with strained resources should engage staff and volunteers (Verma & Biswas, 2023). A collegial work culture in the nonprofit sector is a motivating factor for employees to work for extended tenures (S. Lim et al., 2024). By implementing a consistent practice of celebration and recognition, nonprofit leaders can build a more engaged, committed workforce that is equipped to navigate crises and continue pursuing the organization's mission despite adversity.

Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience is an organization's capacity to proactively anticipate, adapt, and recover from disruptions or crises effectively. Organizational resilience involves assets that enable a company to adapt to, anticipate, and manage crises successfully (Jiang et al., 2024). Leaders' characteristics that promote resilience include adaptability, collaboration, preparedness, trustworthiness, transparency, and emotional intelligence. Organizational resilience is not merely a reactive response to adversity but a proactive approach that involves cultivating a robust foundation of resources, strategies, and competencies to withstand and thrive during disruptions (Herrero & Kraemer, 2022). Leaders of small social assistance nonprofit organizations can enhance their ability to

maintain continuity, protect their internal stakeholders, and emerge strongly from crises by fostering organizational resilience.

Leaders can leverage organizational resilience during crises. There are five fundamental components of organizational resilience: (a) capital resilience, (b) strategic resilience, (c) cultural resilience, (d) relationship resilience, and (e) learning resilience (Chen et al., 2021). The five dimensions of organizational resilience encompass various aspects of an organization's ability to withstand and respond to adverse events, highlighting the imperative of adopting a comprehensive approach to resilience (Fleming et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024). Nonprofit leaders can develop targeted strategies to enhance organizational performance in the face of crises by addressing each aspect of organizational resilience (Chen et al., 2021). Organizational resilience in nonprofits is multifaceted.

Capital Resilience. The first component of organizational resilience is capital resilience. Capital resilience is financial resources and assets that enable an organization to absorb shocks and maintain stability (Ocampo & Ylagan, 2022). Leveraging various forms of capital is crucial to enhancing small social assistance nonprofit organizations' abilities to survive and thrive. Nonprofit leaders can enhance capital resilience through the effective allocation of resources (Chen et al., 2021). Leaders should divert financial and capital resources to programs and measures prioritized by nonprofit organizations (Billups, 2024). Nonprofit leaders can enhance organizational resilience by promoting capital resilience in their organizations.

Leaders further understand capital resilience through organizational capital and relational capital. Organizational capital helps bolster proactive resilience, while relational capital contributes to reactive resilience (Jia et al., 2020). Proactive resilience helps organizational leaders anticipate potential challenges, while reactive resilience helps leaders react to challenges (Chen et al., 2021). Investing in organizational capital, such as robust systems, processes, and infrastructure, can provide stability and support for employees during crises (Herrero & Kraemer, 2022). Relational capital is a network of relationships an organization or business has with its stakeholders and is equally critical for nonprofit organizations (Moshtari & Vanpoucke, 2021). Cultivating relational capital through strong partnerships, collaborations, and stakeholder relationships can enhance the organization's ability to access resources, expertise, and support when needed (Chen et al., 2021). By building and maintaining capital resilience, nonprofit leaders can create a solid foundation for employee engagement and organizational resilience.

Strategic Resilience. Strategic resilience is a second crucial component of organizational resilience. Strategic organizational resilience is the process of developing resources that enable organizations to proactively address change, turn threats into opportunities, and engage in exploration and experimentation (Bardoel & Drago, 2021). Strategic resilience involves cultivating a culture of innovation, adaptability, and strategic thinking (Chen et al., 2021). Strategic resilience involves adapting business models, operations, and strategies in response to changing circumstances (Jiang et al., 2024). Developing leaders' strategic competencies and character is critical for enhancing an

organization's strategic resilience (Spain & Woodruff, 2023). Small nonprofits can invest in leadership development programs that equip leaders with strategic resilience.

Assessing and enhancing strategic resilience capabilities is essential for small social assistance nonprofit organizations. Strategic organizational resilience for small firms involves readiness, flexibility, adaptiveness, and proactiveness (Verreynne et al., 2023). Small social assistance nonprofit leaders can leverage a framework of strategic resilience to assess and enhance their strategic resilience capabilities. Strategic resilience can also enhance employee engagement by addressing changes in a nonprofit organization's economic and social landscape (Szemző et al., 2022). By prioritizing strategic resilience, leaders of small social assistance nonprofits can create an environment that supports employee engagement, adaptability, and long-term sustainability in crises like COVID-19.

Cultural Resilience. Cultural resilience is the third component of organizational resilience. Cultural resilience encompasses the values, beliefs, and behaviors that foster adaptability, collaboration, and innovation within the organization (Chen et al., 2021). Cultural resilience refers to the capacity of an organization's cultural environment to respond to change (Duchek et al., 2020). Organizational leaders promote cultural resilience by embracing technological changes, defining organizational values, encouraging open and transparent communication, and diversifying teams (Moşteanu, 2024). Nonprofit organizational leaders can enhance organizational resilience by promoting the cultural resilience of their organizations.

Transformational leadership can promote cultural resilience. Leaders can enhance cultural resilience by fostering collaboration among employees and leaders (Madi Odeh et al., 2023). Transformational leaders inherently promote cultural resilience through idealized influence and by promoting collaboration (Zadok et al., 2024). Leaders increase organizational cultural resilience by helping employees collectively adapt to challenges and create innovative solutions (Chen et al., 2021). Transformational leaders can foster cultural resilience through intellectual stimulation, which enhances problem-solving and innovation (Thuan, 2020). Nonprofit leaders can enhance cultural resilience by investing in transformational leadership strategies.

Relationship Resilience. Relationship resilience is the fourth component of organizational resilience. Relationship resilience pertains to the strength and quality of an organization's connections with its stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and communities (Moshtari & Vanpoucke, 2021). Nonprofit organizations inherently depend on the relationship between an organization and community members. Without strong community ties, nonprofit organizations fail to meet organizational goals and missions (Beaton, 2021; Wang, 2022). Some nonprofit leaders experience conflicts between their social capital and business strategies, imposing strain on relationships with their communities (Beaton, 2021). Leaders of nonprofit organizations can promote relationship resilience by prioritizing relationships with community stakeholders.

Nonprofit leaders can promote relationship resilience by increasing the visibility of their organizations within a community. Many community stakeholders are unaware of nonprofit organizations present in their local communities (Antolín-López et al., 2022).

Nonprofit leaders can enhance relationship resilience by partnering with other community organizations to increase the breadth and depth of services (Waerder et al., 2022).

Nonprofit leaders can enhance organizational resilience by promoting relationships with the community and encouraging relationship resilience.

Learning Resilience. Learning resilience is the fifth component of organizational resilience. Learning resilience refers to an organization's capacity to continuously learn, improve, and transform based on experiences and insights from navigating crises (Bartuseviciene et al., 2024). Learning resilience implies adaptability, as leaders should recognize challenges and adapt to change (Madi Odeh et al., 2023). Nonprofit leaders should adapt quickly to circumstances influencing community members and partners (Golensky & Hager, 2020). Nonprofit leaders can promote learning resilience by adopting change management principles within their organizations (Addai-Duah, 2020). By targeting learning resilience, nonprofit leaders can promote organizational resilience.

Summary of Organizational Resilience. Organizational resilience is multifaceted. Chen et al. (2021) defined five facets of organizational resilience: (a) capital resilience, (b) strategic resilience, (c) cultural resilience, (d) relationship resilience, and (e) learning resilience. By cultivating resilience across the five dimensions, organizational leaders develop a holistic and robust approach to withstanding and thriving in adversity. Applying organizational resilience principles is paramount for the sustainability and continued impact of small social assistance nonprofit organizations (Fleming et al., 2024). Integrating organizational and community resilience bolsters community resilience during crises (Fleming et al., 2024). Nonprofits that exhibit

resilience can provide essential services, support vulnerable populations, and foster social cohesion during times of upheaval (Khan et al., 2022). By leveraging organizational resilience practices, small nonprofit leaders can significantly contribute to the overall resilience of their communities.

Relationship Between Organizational Resilience and Employee Engagement

Lack of employee engagement can hinder organizational resilience. Employee engagement is based on an employee's commitment to an organization (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Reduced employee commitment often hinders organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations (Waerder et al., 2022). Decreased employee commitment primarily results from increased demand for extrinsic rewards in the nonprofit sector, exacerbated by financial stressors during the pandemic (Akkermans et al., 2020; Newby & Branyon, 2021). The adverse effects of the global health crisis on employee well-being, coupled with pay and benefit cuts implemented by many small social assistance nonprofits, further compounded challenges with employee commitment (Walk et al., 2020). Employee commitment to an organization impacts organizational resilience.

Organizational resilience is related to employee engagement. Employee engagement promotes organizational resilience by enhancing employees' adaptability, performance, and sustainability amidst national health crises like COVID-19 (D. Li et al., 2021). Psychological empowerment, trust, and organizational support mediate employee engagement and organizational resilience (Mao et al., 2023; Widiana & Soetjipto, 2021). Creating a supportive work environment, promoting psychological well-being, and fostering a sense of empowerment among employees enhances engagement levels and

organizational resilience in challenging circumstances. Organizational leaders can better position their organizations to navigate crises and maintain employee engagement by building organizational resilience (Malik & Garg, 2020). Employee engagement is related to organizational resilience.

Leaders who navigate organizational objectives and create an engaging work environment during crises are crucial for organizational resilience in the nonprofit sector. Employee engagement during crises is vital for achieving organizational objectives and maintaining service delivery to communities, a form of organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations (Azevedo et al., 2022; Mumford et al., 2023). Employee engagement enhances organizational resilience by fostering adaptable, collaborative, and innovative employees (Malik & Garg, 2020). Organizational resilience also improves work-related outcomes like engagement, satisfaction, and performance (Ibrahim & Hussein, 2024). Understanding and implementing insights into organizational resilience is crucial for nonprofit leaders to promote employee engagement, enabling leaders to cultivate an engaged workforce focused on achieving the organization's mission.

Strategies for Enhancing Organizational Resilience

Crisis communication planning is essential for promoting organizational resilience in small nonprofit organizations during times of crisis. Crisis communication is a structured framework for effective communication and response strategies, enabling nonprofit leaders to establish clear protocols for internal and external communication (Haupt & Azevedo, 2021). Proactive approaches help organizational leaders maintain transparency, build stakeholder trust, and mitigate potential reputational risks. Effective

crisis communication enhances coordination and collaboration within the organization, facilitating swift decision-making and response to crisis situations (Haupt & Azevedo, 2021). Crisis communication planning assists small nonprofit organizations in addressing challenges related to financial sustainability, human resources management, outreach, program and service delivery, and leadership during crises (Woznyj et al., 2023).

Organizational leaders can identify vulnerabilities, develop contingency measures, and allocate resources effectively to ensure operational continuity and resilience by incorporating key identified areas into their crisis communication plans.

Crisis communication planning fosters a culture of adaptability, learning, and innovation within small nonprofit organizations, enhancing organizational resilience. By incorporating lessons learned from past crises, organizational leaders can continuously improve their crisis communication strategies and response mechanisms, enabling them to navigate future challenges more effectively (Chen et al., 2021). Effective crisis communication planning also helps organizational leaders build relationships with external partners, donors, and volunteers, enhancing their capacity to mobilize resources and support during crises (Azevedo et al., 2022). Proactively engaging with employees and maintaining open lines of communication strengthens organizational resilience.

Technology integration can significantly enhance organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations during national crises. Leveraging technological innovation and digital tools enables remote work, facilitates communication, and streamlines operations during crises (Liu et al., 2024). By investing in technology infrastructure, nonprofit leaders can improve their agility, efficiency, and responsiveness to crisis situations (Son

et al., 2024). Digital tools and platforms assist in maintaining communication and collaboration among employees during crises. Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams facilitate remote work and ensure continuous engagement by enabling real-time communication and virtual meetings (Liu et al., 2024). Project management software like Trello and Asana help organize tasks and track progress, fostering a sense of accomplishment and teamwork. Utilizing technology for remote work allows employees to continue their duties from home, maintaining productivity and ensuring business continuity while protecting the health and safety of staff members (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Technological integration can support operational continuity and foster a more engaged workforce.

Embracing technology is essential for enhancing organizational resilience and operational performance. Openness to technological advancements builds the information processing capabilities necessary for effective crisis management (Yu et al., 2024). Integrating communication technologies, such as social media, bridges distances and maintains operations during crises, strengthening organizational resilience (Bomsta & Kerr, 2023). Technology can ensure the sustained delivery of essential services during challenging times. By prioritizing technological advancements, nonprofit leaders can better navigate crises and support their communities more effectively.

Transition

In Section 2, I critically analyzed the literature on employee engagement strategies and organizational resilience in nonprofit organizations. I first described how the study's conceptual framework, transformational leadership theory, applies to

employee engagement and organizational resilience in small social assistance nonprofit organizations. I considered LMX as a contrasting theory. I next described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonprofit organizations in Northern California. I explored employee engagement, leadership, and motivational strategies for employee engagement. I also discussed resources for engaging employees and how organizational culture impacts employee engagement. In the last main section of the literature review, I explored organization resilience and its relationship to employee engagement. I discussed strategies nonprofit leaders can use to enhance the resilience of their organizations.

In Section 3, I describe the methodology used in the study. Section 3 contains a description of ethical considerations and the study's chosen research methodology and design. I also discuss procedures for participant recruitment and selection, data collection, and data analysis. I describe the procedures I used to promote the study's reliability and validity. In Section 4, I present the study's findings and discuss the study's implications for practice and positive social change. The data obtained in the study led to data-driven recommendations for practice and future research.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In this qualitative study, I employed a pragmatic inquiry design to explore effective strategies used by leaders of small social assistance nonprofits to engage employees during crises. I focused on a population of executives and directors from small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California who had successfully implemented employee engagement strategies during crises. I used a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit eight participants who met specific inclusion criteria qualifying them for the study. I collected data primarily through semistructured interviews, supplemented by a review of relevant organizational documents. To ensure ethical conduct, I adhered to IRB guidelines, implemented rigorous confidentiality protocols, and obtained informed consent from all participants. I used thematic analysis to analyze the data from the semistructured interviews to identify patterns and insights from the participants. In Section 3, I also discuss the methods I used to enhance the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Project Ethics

The ethical conduct of research is a fundamental responsibility of the researcher, particularly when the study involves human participants. As the researcher, my primary responsibilities encompassed the systematic gathering and analysis of data to address the study's research question, the oversight of participant recruitment, and the adherence to established procedural ethics (see Potthoff et al., 2023). Adopting a situated ethics approach is essential for promoting flexibility and reflexivity in navigating ethical considerations in research (Gliniecka, 2023; Roos et al., 2021). By embracing research

ethical standards, I addressed individual and structural ethical challenges that arise throughout the research process, ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Managing nonprofit employees during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for me. The pandemic's onset sparked my curiosity about successful strategies other leaders used to sustain organizational resilience. Small nonprofits often provide crucial services to populations overlooked by larger institutions (Azevedo et al., 2022). My insight, coupled with reported findings on the vulnerability of small nonprofit organizations (Akingbola et al., 2023), intensified my interest. My challenge was understanding how small nonprofits with limited resources navigated crises effectively. I held no position of direct influence over the participants, and I had no previous involvement with the leaders of small social assistance nonprofits who participated in the study.

Upholding the ethical principles outlined in the *Belmont Report* is a critical responsibility of the researcher. Researchers should adhere to ethical research's foundational principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (Redman & Caplan, 2021; Ritchie, 2021). Navigating ethical complexities becomes crucial when research involves vulnerable participants or sensitive topics (Potthoff et al., 2023). I carefully considered potentially intrusive or emotionally challenging interview questions, ensured I followed informed consent procedures and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). By prioritizing ethical considerations, I protected the well-being and rights of the participants throughout the research process.

I protected the participants' identities and confidentiality in the study.

Safeguarding participants' privacy and sensitive information demonstrates a researcher's respect for the participants' autonomy and decision-making authority (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Staunton et al., 2022). Itzik and Walsh (2023) recommended pseudonymizing all identifiable information. I used pseudonyms in place of participants' names in all research materials to uphold participant confidentiality. I ensured the protection of the participants' privacy to foster trust and encourage candid participation by implementing rigorous confidentiality protocols.

Informed consent is a critical component of ethical research. I strictly adhered to the informed consent guidelines set forth by the IRB to ensure that all participants volunteered willingly for the study. Obtaining informed consent is essential for facilitating effective communication between the researcher and the participants (Jenkins et al., 2020; Moriña, 2020). My strategy for acquiring informed consent involved using an informed consent form with comprehensive information about the study, including the participants' roles, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw consent, the advantages and disadvantages associated with participating, and the confidentiality measures implemented. I offered to review the informed consent form with each participant should questions arise, but no participant required additional clarification. Researchers should ensure the participants completely comprehend the informed consent form, as informed consent is the ethical foundation of research study protocols (O'Shea, 2022). I upheld the ethical standards provided by the *Belmont Report*

and fostered a relationship of trust and transparency with the participants throughout the study by prioritizing informed consent.

Each participant's right to withdraw from the research project is a fundamental aspect of ethical research. I clearly communicated how participants could discontinue their involvement in the study. Ethical standards indicate that participants can withdraw from a study without further explanation (Fernandez Lynch, 2020). Researchers should prioritize respect for participants' autonomy and enable their decision to withdraw without any detrimental consequences (Jadallah, 2024). The consent form explicitly stated the voluntary nature of participation and reiterated the participants' right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The participants could have withdrawn by contacting me via email, text, or phone.

I offered participants an incentive to participate in the study. Offering incentives can improve participant motivation and engagement and foster active participation (Engel & Ruder, 2020). Researchers should use low-value tokens of appreciation incentives, such as digital retail gift cards valued at less than \$20, to encourage participation and maintain engagement (Ballandies, 2022; Fernandez Lynch, 2020). I upheld the ethical principle of voluntary participation and promoted active engagement by providing a small incentive.

Protecting participants' confidentiality is a critical component of ethical research. Researchers demonstrate respect for participants' autonomy by safeguarding participants' identities and protecting their privacy and sensitive information (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Staunton et al., 2022). Using pseudonyms in qualitative research guarantees participant

confidentiality (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). To protect the participants' confidentiality, I pseudonymized all identifiable information, including participants' names, using generic or fictional names in the transcripts, data analysis, and presentation of results. To keep their identities confidential, I assigned the participants pseudonyms, APP1, APP2, through APP8. I restricted all access to the participants' identifying information, further safeguarding participant confidentiality. I prioritized protecting the participants' privacy and sensitive information by using pseudonyms and securing all data in the study.

Cloud storage services offer a secure and scalable method for storing vast quantities of data. Cloud platforms provide security measures, such as encryption, access controls, and data redundancy, to guarantee the confidentiality and integrity of stored data (Chen et al., 2018). Using cloud storage reduces the likelihood of data loss due to device malfunction, theft, or physical damage (Prakash & Elizabeth, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). To safeguard the data in the study, I stored all information on a password-protected encrypted cloud drive for at least 5 years following the study's completion. After 5 years, I will destroy the data using data destruction software. I maintained the privacy and confidentiality of the participants throughout the research process. The study's IRB number was #09-05-24-1181156.

Nature of the Project

I used the pragmatic inquiry as the research design to address the research questions in the current qualitative study. The pragmatic inquiry research design integrates elements from various research methodologies, such as descriptive research, action research, design research, and evaluation research (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020).

Qualitative research is particularly suited for investigating effective business strategies used by leaders (Gephart & Saylor, 2020). Qualitative approaches enable an in-depth examination of human experiences, attitudes, and perspectives, which is essential for understanding the complex dynamics of employee engagement during crises (Akingbola et al., 2023; Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). Nonprofit organizations operate within unique contexts with specific challenges and constraints (Haupt & Azevedo, 2021). Employing a qualitative research method was advantageous for capturing nuances and complexities of a phenomenon, offering a deeper understanding of how leaders navigated and addressed the specific challenges encountered by small social assistance nonprofit organizations.

The pragmatic inquiry research design is a valuable framework for exploring the diverse experiences of participants in a practical and contextually grounded manner. Pragmatic inquiry facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dimensions of a research subject, making the pragmatic inquiry design suitable for capturing the real-world experiences and perspectives of leaders (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). The pragmatic inquiry design is valuable in research endeavors by bridging theory and practical applications (Bui et al., 2023; Morley et al., 2022). I used the pragmatic inquiry design in the study to identify insights into practical strategies for managing nonprofit employees amidst crises, contributing to theoretical and practical implications. Qualitative research methods, such as semistructured interviews and thematic analysis, enable researchers to explore a phenomenon in-depth (Alves et al., 2020). I applied the pragmatic inquiry design using qualitative research methods to obtain a robust foundation for understanding

the complexities faced by nonprofit leaders during times of crisis. I used the design to explore effective strategies used to navigate challenges.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The targeted population included executives and directors of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California who had implemented successful strategies to engage employees during crises. Eight participants were chosen from the target population who met specific inclusion criteria. Eligibility criteria for participants included being: (a) over 18 years of age, (b) leaders of small social assistance nonprofit organizations, (c) had at least 5 years of experience as a nonprofit leader, and (d) had implemented successful strategies to engage employees during crises. I used the inclusion criteria to ensure that the participants' characteristics aligned with the purpose of the overarching research.

Researchers typically use eligibility criteria to ensure that research participants possess the necessary characteristics to achieve the study's objectives. Employing eligibility criteria in academic research guarantees that participants meet specific requirements relevant to the research purpose and question (Su et al., 2023). Clearly specifying who is eligible to participate in a study enables researchers to collect valuable data that directly addresses research questions while minimizing the influence of extraneous factors (Gerber et al., 2022). Implementing well-defined eligibility criteria is essential for maintaining the integrity and validity of the research findings by allowing for the collection of data that is directly applicable to the research questions and the target population.

I gained access to the participants by leveraging Walden's participant pool, personal networks, and social media platforms. Using a multifaceted strategy for recruiting participants in research studies improves the robustness of the recruitment process by targeting and engaging a broad range of participants and a representative sample (Rogers et al., 2021). A multifaceted recruitment approach results in a more diverse and representative participant pool and can build trust and rapport among participants, enhancing the likelihood of successful recruitment (Diallo et al., 2023; Guagliano et al., 2020). I leveraged various local and online networks to reach potential participants who met the specified criteria by posting my recruitment invitation on each platform. The recruitment invitation is found in Appendix A. I aimed to attract diverse participants who could provide valuable insights and contribute to the richness and validity of the research findings by implementing a comprehensive recruitment strategy. I recruited eight participants whose characteristics align with the study's purpose.

I established a strong working relationship with the participants. Trust and rapport with participants form the cornerstone of qualitative research (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). I shared project information with the participants upfront to ensure that each participant understood the research's purpose, scope, and expectations. The informed consent process is vital for building participant trust, respecting their autonomy and dignity, and ensuring participants are adequately informed about the research study (Coleman et al., 2021). An environment of trust facilitates open, honest communication throughout the research process, enhancing the quality and depth of data collected (Nyirenda et al., 2020). I

emphasized transparent communication to foster a trusting, collaborative relationship with participants.

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants for the study. Purposeful sampling involves selecting knowledgeable participants using predefined inclusion criteria (Stratton, 2024), such as the criteria defined in the study. Purposive sampling is used by researchers to select specific individuals or groups with relevant characteristics, ensuring the sample reflects population diversity (Campbell et al., 2020). I used purposeful sampling through social media and Walden's participant pool as the primary recruitment strategy. Purposive sampling was not sufficient to identify all of the participants that I required. Therefore, I used snowball sampling as a secondary recruitment method. In snowball sampling, researchers ask current study participants to pass the study information to others who may meet the inclusion criteria (Parker et al., 2019). Using a diverse recruitment plan aids in attracting candidates and contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the study (Negrin et al., 2022). Combining purposeful and snowball sampling approaches supported accessing a sample that was representative of the target population.

Researchers should carefully consider the sample size in qualitative studies. I chose a sample size of eight participants out of consideration for data saturation. Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when interviewing additional participants data no longer yields new information or themes (Guest et al., 2020), indicating a thorough understanding of the studied phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) ascertained that qualitative studies generally reach saturation after researchers

complete six to 17 interviews. Researchers should continue recruiting and interviewing participants until the data reaches saturation (Guest et al., 2020). I assessed whether the data reached saturation after completing six interviews. I did not observe saturation. Therefore, I conducted additional interviews until I reached code saturation, which occurred after eight interviews.

I emphasized achieving saturation rather than adhering to a predetermined sample size. The number of participants required for saturation may vary based on research topic complexity, participant pool heterogeneity, and data richness (Hennink et al., 2019). Focusing on data saturation helps researchers avoid the pitfalls of insufficient data or redundant information by ensuring that data collection reaches a point where new information is no longer being discovered, indicating that the data is sufficient to draw conclusions (Zhang & Liu, 2021). Focusing on data saturation encourages a thoughtful and responsive approach to participant selection and data collection, leading to efficient and effective data analysis (Hennink et al., 2019). I recruited and interviewed participants until I observed data saturation in the data analysis.

Data Collection Activities

I now provide information about the data collection instruments and activities used in the study. I first describe myself as the primary instrument and semistructured interviews as the second instrument in the study. I then detail the procedures for data collection.

Research Instruments

I was the primary instrument in the current qualitative pragmatic inquiry. Qualitative researchers act as human instruments to systematically gather data to address the study's research question while adhering to ethical guidelines and regulations (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Adhering to such ethical guidelines involves overseeing every aspect of the research process, including the research design, conduct, and reporting. Managing all research phases is necessary to ensure proper data collection and analysis (Levit et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2022). Verifying that the collected data is suitable for answering the research question is critical for maintaining the integrity and validity of the research outcomes (Mwita, 2022). By overseeing all stages of the research process, I served as the main instrument to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study's findings, contributing to advancing knowledge in business administration.

The second instrument in the study was a semistructured interview. A researcher's choice of a data collection method is crucial for gathering comprehensive and insightful data (Taherdoost, 2021). Semistructured interviews offer flexibility and depth in obtaining information from participants, which is particularly useful in qualitative research (Dunwoodie et al., 202; Guest et al., 2020). The semistructured interview method aligned with the study's intent to collect rich and relevant data. Thus, by using semistructured interviews, I gathered the participants' responses to gather specific insights into strategies for employee engagement, leading to themes that addressed the research question.

I used an interview guide to facilitate the semistructured interviews. A well-structured interview guide helps researchers facilitate fluid conversations and establish a conducive environment for participants to share their experiences and viewpoints (Gürcan & Atay Turan, 2021). I used the interview protocol to guide the interview process, allowing for a consistent approach with multiple participants. I developed the interview guide based on key academic and professional literature topics. Interview guides help reduce bias and enhance the validity and reliability of the results (Ashkenazi & Fisher, 2024). My interview protocol encompassed scripted opening statements, predetermined interview questions, and closing remarks (see Appendix B). The interview guide was a roadmap for consistency and a tool for capturing unexpected insights.

The third instrument in the study was publicly available organizational documents, including the websites of the participants' non-profit organizations. Many nonprofit organizations post information about careers at their organizations to attract employees (Ritz et al., 2023). Nonprofit websites also tend to delineate the mission statement of their organizations, which can lead to the engagement of employees whose ideals align with the nonprofit's mission (Berlan et al., 2024). I scrutinized the websites and social media sites of the participants' nonprofit organizations for evidence of employee engagement strategies.

Data Collection Procedures

Researchers should carefully consider several factors when scheduling interviews to ensure an efficient and effective process. Researcher flexibility is a key factor in scheduling research interviews because participants can fit interviews into schedule gaps

or reschedule on short notice if no travel is required (Keen et al., 2022). Some participants may be unable or unwilling to travel for face-to-face interviews, necessitating alternative interview methods. Virtual interviews can increase flexibility and reduce the need for travel, making scheduling mutually convenient for researchers and participants (Lipman, 2020). I accommodated participants' availability and preferences by coordinating with the participants to find mutually convenient times and dates for interviews. I provided participants with multiple options for completing interviews, including in-person, phone, or video conferencing through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. All participants chose to conduct the interview online. I recorded the virtual interviews using the built-in recording features of the chosen virtual platforms. I used the Otter.ai transcription software to transcribe the audio recordings. The meticulous transcription of interview recordings is essential to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the collected data. To ensure transcription accuracy, I compared the transcription generated by Otter.ai line-by-line with the original audio recording to ensure fidelity with the original dialogue.

Establishing rapport during interviews is crucial for fostering trust and openness and for creating an environment conducive to candid discussion. Active listening, empathy, and respectful communication align with best practices in qualitative research for building rapport with participants (Nahouli et al., 2021). During the interviews, I followed the interview guide rigorously. I took detailed notes during the interviews to capture key points, quotes, and observations, supplemented by audio recordings for accuracy and completeness. Taking notes during interviews ensures that the data collected is comprehensive and reliable, providing a solid foundation for subsequent

analysis and interpretation (Khoa et al., 2023). My notes taken during the interview helped me capture nuances in tone and expression. I rigorously documented interviews through recordings and detailed notes.

I used several strategies to enhance the reliability and validity of the study's findings. I ensured transcription accuracy by comparing the audio recordings line-by-line with the transcriptions to ensure I accurately captured the participants' responses, providing a reliable foundation for subsequent analysis. I emailed each participant a deidentified copy of their interview transcript for their review, asking for feedback on the accuracy of their responses. My interview script told participants that if they had significant concerns about the transcript, I would do a follow-up interview to clarify their responses. Researchers can use follow-up interviews to delve deeper into specific topics, clarify responses, and address any ambiguities from the initial interviews (Carra et al., 2023). Researchers use an iterative process to comprehensively understand the participants' perspectives and experiences, enriching the data collected. No participants required additional follow-up interviews. Reviewing interview transcripts and notes simultaneously, integrating data from various participants, and engaging in reflexivity are best practices in qualitative research that contribute to the validity and reliability of a study's findings (Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Potthoff et al., 2023). I used transcript review, data triangulation, and reflexivity to ensure the thoroughness and credibility of the data collection and analysis processes.

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?
2. What leadership styles do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?
3. What motivational strategies do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?
4. Can you provide examples of specific strategies or initiatives you implemented to enhance organizational sustainability during a crisis?
5. What resources do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?
6. What processes or systems do you use to enhance employee engagement?
7. In what way, if at all, does your organizational resilience impact employee engagement?
8. In what ways does your organizational culture impact employee engagement?
9. Is there anything else you can tell me about strategies to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations that I did not ask about?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I used a comprehensive organizational system to organize and analyze the research data effectively. The organizational system included the secure storage of audio files and transcriptions labeled with participants' pseudonyms and a research and reflexive notebook. In my research notebook, I included a reflexivity journal to denote

my thoughts, biases, and preconceptions. Qualitative researchers should systematically catalog textual data, audio recordings, and data tables (Albalawi et al., 2020). The chosen organizational approach facilitated deep exploration, iterative reflection, pattern recognition, and interpretation, all hallmarks of qualitative research methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Peters, 2023). I ensured a structured and thorough approach to data management and analysis throughout the research process by implementing an organizational system.

Data Analysis Techniques

I analyzed the data using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a robust methodological approach that is well-suited to exploring the nuances gathered during qualitative data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify patterns or themes within qualitative data, facilitating the exploration of complex phenomena through the participants' experiences (Sherrill et al., 2022). Scholars advocate for employing the thematic analysis method when researchers want to use inductive reasoning to classify data into broader generalizations that represent data patterns (Oldenburg et al., 2023). In the context of small nonprofits during crises, thematic analysis helped identify the perceived benefits, barriers, and facilitators of providing unwavering support to employees. Researchers can use thematic analysis to comprehensively explore themes related to employee engagement, organizational resilience, and the effectiveness of support interventions (Volohtchuk & Leite, 2021). Thematic analysis was an appropriate method for analyzing the data in the study because the method aligned well with the research objectives. Thematic analysis allowed me to

thoroughly and systematically explore the qualitative data to uncover nuanced insights into the complex experiences and perceptions of leaders in small social assistance nonprofit organizations during national crises.

Thematic analysis is a highly effective technique for analyzing qualitative data from interviews. The thematic analysis method used in the study was Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step method for thematic analysis. The thematic analysis process involved six steps: data familiarization, generating initial codes, grouping codes into categories, extracting themes, refining naming themes, and producing a report that includes the analysis and interpretation of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Fox & Champion, 2022). In Step 1, researchers familiarize themselves with the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data familiarization involves converting audio files into transcripts and closely reading each interview to comprehensively understand the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I familiarized myself with the data when I compared the audio recordings to the transcriptions to ensure transcription accuracy. I also read each participant's interview transcript from start to finish multiple times to gather my initial impressions about the collected data. During Step 1, I emailed each participant a copy of their interview transcript and a summary of my interpretations of their answers, asking for feedback. Composing a summary of my interpretations aided in data familiarization.

The second step in the thematic analysis was coding. During coding, researchers organize the data into meaningful units, or codes, using a codebook that outlines descriptive phrases based on participants' ideas and thoughts (Saldaña, 2021). The coding process is the foundation for organizing and categorizing the data, laying the groundwork

for subsequent analysis (Rienecke et al., 2023). Coding involves repeatedly reviewing the participants' responses to identify and refine codes as necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Chen & Lou, 2023). I used NVivo Version 14, beginning in the second step, to help me organize the codes coherently.

The third step of Braun and Clarke's method for thematic analysis was categorization. During categorization, researchers review and group codes based on pattern recognition into categories representing small-scale patterns in the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I used NVivo Version 14 to help me categorize the coded data. NVivo can aid researchers in analyzing and examining the data, enabling the generation of visuals such as charts, idea maps, and word clouds, as well as executing queries to identify patterns and connections (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I also implemented cross-referencing techniques to help identify patterns between codes. After the codes were organized into categories, I used the categories to extract themes.

Step 4 of Braun and Clarke's method for thematic analysis was theme extraction. During theme extraction, researchers group the identified categories into larger-scale patterns called themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I used the thematic analysis method to identify recurring patterns, themes, and critical insights within the coded data, specifically focusing on aspects of transformational leadership within small social assistance nonprofits and the themes identified in the study's literature review. I reviewed the identified themes in Step 5, renaming and redefining codes, categories, and themes as necessary to best describe the collected data. By systematically examining the data through a rigorous analytical approach, I sought to uncover the underlying meanings and

interpretations embedded within participants' narratives, thereby contributing significant insights to the existing literature on employee engagement strategies within the nonprofit sector

In Step 6 of the thematic analysis method, I integrated the themes identified during the data analysis with the academic literature to contextualize and enrich the findings. The integration process involves correlating the themes with existing research, including new studies published since the proposal was written (Guest et al., 2020). By aligning the identified themes with the study's conceptual framework of transformational leadership, I aimed to establish connections and contribute to theoretical advancement in the field. The integrative approach enables a deep understanding of how leadership practices, particularly transformational leadership, influence employee engagement and organizational resilience during crises (Fazekas, 2024). The synthesis of empirical findings with established theories provided a comprehensive perspective on leadership dynamics in small nonprofit organizations during challenging times, enhancing the study's contribution to theory and practice.

After I completed the data analysis, I reviewed the company documents I described in the *Instruments* section. I evaluated the nonprofits' websites and Facebook pages for evidence of employee engagement strategies. All evidence was recorded digitally and in my research notebook. If the nonprofits' websites or Facebook pages had evidence of employee engagement strategies, I assigned pseudonyms to the nonprofit organizations, and I compared the engagement strategies to the themes I identified from the thematic analysis. I discussed the congruence of strategies in the research findings. I

also discussed any discrepancies in employee engagement strategies if they existed.

Discussing negative cases can enhance the credibility of the study's findings (Coleman, 2022). I used a review of company documents to triangulate the data from the interview findings to provide a more robust description of the study's phenomenon.

I securely stored all data collected during the study for at least 5 years. The recent increase in volume and types of research data, coupled with technological advancements, necessitates preserving research data for long-term availability and usability (Kim & Faulkner, 2021). I stored the data on a password-protected encrypted cloud drive to prevent unauthorized access or data loss. I used regular backups to mitigate the risk of data loss due to technical failures or other unforeseen circumstances. The secure storage of research data for an extended period allows for potential reanalysis, facilitates verification of findings, and supports future research endeavors (Chen et al., 2022). Long-term data preservation enables researchers to address any questions or concerns regarding the study's methodology or results, even years after its completion (J. Y. Lim et al., 2024). Using a rigorous approach to data management underscored my commitment to maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of research data, enhancing the credibility of the study's findings, and contributing to the broader knowledge base of the business community.

Reliability and Validity

Maintaining reliability and validity in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Researchers achieve reliability in qualitative research by assessing dependability, using methods such as intercoder

agreement, member checking, and triangulation of data sources (Firdaus et al., 2022).

Establishing reliability allows for the replication of the study by other researchers (Clarke et al., 2023). Validity in qualitative research ensures that the study accurately captures the phenomenon under investigation (Budi et al., 2023). By implementing reliable data collection methods and procedures, researchers can enhance the consistency and dependability of their findings (Firdaus et al., 2022). I established reliability and validity in the study to present meaningful and relevant findings to the research question, contributing to the overall quality and impact of the research.

Reliability

Researchers assess reliability through dependability in qualitative research. Dependability refers to the degree to which research is well-documented and reliable (Goldsmith, 2021). I used two primary strategies to ensure dependability: member checking and comprehensive transcript review. Member checking allows participants to validate the researcher's interpretation of the data, verifying the accuracy and relevance of participants' viewpoints as presented in the findings (Motulsky, 2021). Member checking enhances the credibility of the study's conclusions and promotes openness between the researcher and participants (Firdaus et al., 2022). I used thorough documentation and meticulous transcript review to complement dependability. Comprehensive record-keeping throughout the research process helps to ensure transparency and enables other scholars to audit the study's procedures and findings (Goldsmith, 2021). I clarified the study's execution through detailed documentation, including an interview protocol and an audit trail. The documentation approach allows readers to assess the dependability and

trustworthiness of the study's findings (Goldsmith, 2021). I enhanced the reliability of the study's findings through member checking and thorough documentation of the study's methods and data.

Integrating member checking, thorough documentation, and comprehensive transcript review into the research methodology ensures high standards of dependability. By involving participants in the data interpretation phase, researchers can foster a sense of ownership and collaboration, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the data collected (George et al., 2023). By thoroughly documenting research procedures, protocols, and findings, researchers can ensure that a study is transparent, reproducible, and easily comprehensible to others in the scientific community (Navalta et al., 2022). I used rigorous methodological approaches to bolster the reliability of the study's findings, advancing knowledge in the field.

Validity

In qualitative research, researchers assess validity through credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Ensuring credibility in my research study is paramount to establishing the validity of the findings and the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn. I achieved validity by employing member checking, participant transcript review, and triangulation (Clarke et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2022). Member checking involves actively engaging participants in the validation process, allowing the participants to confirm the accuracy and relevance of their perspectives as interpreted within the study's report (Potthoff et al., 2023). To conduct member checking, I created a summary of my interpretations of each participant's answers to the interview questions and emailed the

summaries to individual participants with their interview transcripts. I invited the participants to confirm my interpretations or provide other thoughts or explanations. Involving participants directly in the interpretation of data helps foster transparency and ensures that the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences and viewpoints.

Participant transcript review helps ensure data accuracy and reliability in qualitative research. After the interview, I asked participants to review their interview transcripts to verify response accuracy and confirm their perspectives were correctly captured. Transcript review enhances study credibility and fosters participant engagement (Clarke et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2022). I used triangulation, which involved analyzing multiple data sources or methods (Firdaus et al., 2022), to corroborate the interview findings and strengthen interpretation validity. I used transcript review and triangulation to contribute to the overall quality and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Ensuring transferability is crucial for enhancing the relevance and applicability of research findings to diverse contexts and future studies. I provided details about the research methodology and context, including the study design, data collection methods, and participant characteristics. Methodical documentation of the study's methods and participants offers insights that can be extrapolated to different contexts or populations (Awan et al., 2020; Jaksa et al., 2022). I enhanced transferability by explicitly describing limitations and constraints, which can enable readers to understand the boundaries and how the findings may be applied (Jaksa et al., 2022). I described the broader implications of the research findings and explained how the findings could inform future investigations or interventions. The study's implications can also contribute to the

transferability of the study's outcomes (Awan et al., 2020). Implementing transferability strategies facilitated the integration of current findings into the broader body of knowledge, fostering a cumulative research effort that advances understanding and practice across various settings and populations.

As the researcher, I ensured confirmability in my study to maintain objectivity and neutrality in the research findings. I addressed confirmability using multiple strategies: probing participants during interviews, conducting follow-up member-checking interviews, triangulating data from multiple sources, and performing reflexive commentary. Probing, member-checking, triangulation, and reflexive commentary provided evidence of the study's methodological rigor and helped minimize researcher bias (Kelley et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2024). I also maintained an audit trail documenting all decisions I made in the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation, to enhance confirmability. My comprehensive approach to confirmability strengthened the overall trustworthiness of my study, allowing readers to trace the development of insights and conclusions back to the original data sources.

Ensuring data saturation is an essential aspect of qualitative research that enhances the study's credibility and trustworthiness. I implemented meticulous data collection and analysis procedures to promote confirmability. I assessed data saturation by conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously, allowing me to identify and refine emerging themes and patterns. Once no new information or themes emerge from additional data collection, the data is saturated, signaling the end of the data collection phase (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). I assessed data saturation to ensure that the data

collected was comprehensive and sufficient to address the study's purpose and research question. By rigorously pursuing data saturation, I enhanced the transferability, confirmability, and credibility of my study's findings

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I provided a comprehensive overview of the project's ethical considerations, researcher's role, study design, population, sampling, data collection activities, and interview questions. I also described data organization and analysis techniques, explaining how I used thematic analysis to analyze the data. I outlined the importance of ensuring transferability, reliability, and validity through meticulous documentation, member checking, participant transcript review, and triangulation. In Section 4, I explore the study's findings and discuss the implications of the findings for business practices. I also provided recommendations for future research and discuss how the study contributes to opportunities for social change.

Section 4: Research Project Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was to explore effective strategies used by leaders of small social assistance nonprofits in Northern California to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations. I addressed the study's purpose using one overarching research question: What are the effective strategies that leaders of U.S. small social assistance nonprofits use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations?

I collected data using semistructured interviews with eight leaders of Northern California small social assistance nonprofits. I analyzed the participating leaders' organizational Facebook and LinkedIn pages, websites, and informational brochures. I transcribed the interviews, iteratively coded the data, and identified three themes pertaining to strategies to enhance employee engagement during crises. The first theme was that leadership in times of crisis promotes engagement. The second theme was that community and team-building fosters employee well-being and engagement. The third theme was that organizational resilience and adaptation foster engagement. In Section 4, I present, analyze, and discuss the study's findings in the context of the professional literature and the study's conceptual framework.

Summary of Data Collected in The Study

I collected data primarily through semistructured interviews with eight Northern California small social assistance nonprofits on strategies to engage employees during crises. Table 1 contains a summary of the data collected in the study, detailing the

sampling method used to identify the participants, the length of each interview, and the dates each participant was contacted, returned informed consent, and was interviewed.

Table 1

Summary of Data Collected in the Study

Participant	Sampling method	Date contacted	Date returned informed consent	Interview date	Interview length (MM:SS)
APP1	Purposive	September 6, 2024	September 6, 2024	September 8, 2024	13:37
APP2	Purposive	September 6, 2024	September 6, 2024	September 8, 2024	37:11
APP3	Snowball	September 26, 2024	September 27, 2024	September 30, 2024	33:15
APP4	Snowball	September 17, 2024	September 17, 2024	September 20, 2024	32:14
APP5	Snowball	September 6, 2024	September 6, 2024	September 8, 2024	36:08
APP6	Purposive	September 6, 2024	September 6, 2024	September 10, 2024	24:55
APP7	Purposive	September 12, 2024	September 12, 2024	September 14, 2024	20:27
APP8	Purposive	September 18, 2024	September 18, 2024	September 21, 2024	24:19
TOTAL	--	--	--	--	3:42:06

Table 1 shows that I identified five participants through purposive sampling and three participants through snowball sampling. I conducted data collection and analysis concurrently by completing an interview, immediately transcribing it, creating a member-checking summary, and coding and categorizing the data. After I had completed six interviews, I had not yet reached code saturation because I was still generating unique codes for the sixth interview transcript. I recruited two additional participants through snowball sampling. After the eighth interview, I reached code saturation.

I ensured that the interview data was accurate using member checking. Member checking can enhance the dependability and credibility of qualitative research by allowing participants to provide feedback about a researcher's interpretation of the data (Candela, 2019). I sent a summary of my interpretation of each participant's responses to the interview questions for verification to conduct member checking. I also included each participant's transcript in the member-checking email. Appendix C contains the member-

checking documents that I sent to each participant. All participants confirmed that they received the document and indicated that the interpretations were correct.

Theme 1: Leadership in Times of Crisis Promotes Employee Engagement

The participants explored how leadership in times of crisis promotes employee engagement, highlighting leadership strategies and characteristics and goal-setting in crisis management. I developed Theme 1 from six codes organized into two categories, involving the perspectives of all eight participants. Table 2 contains a summary of the codes and categories contributing to Theme 1.

Table 2

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 1

Category	Codes and represented participants
C1. Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm leadership in crises (APP1, APP2, APP3, APP5) • Vulnerability in leadership (APP4) • Servant leadership (APP4, APP6, APP8) • Transformational leadership (APP6, APP8) • Role modeling for employees (APP3, APP6)
C2. Crisis Management Through Goal Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting small, achievable goals (APP2, APP3, APP5)

Category C1: Leadership During Crises

The participants emphasized different leadership strategies to engage employees during crises, with calm leadership being a defining feature. AAP1 explained, “I try to demonstrate strong and steady and diminish the anxiety that employees feel despite my own personal concerns, trying to demonstrate strength and confidence that we're all going to be okay.” APP2 found that remaining calm helps employees navigate a crisis collectively, which promotes engagement. APP2 said:

Their focus shifts from the immediate issue at hand, hearing my voice, and getting them to kind of calm down so that we can then troubleshoot and figure out how to

kind of navigate the situation. In those situations, everybody's frantic, everybody's scared, nobody's thinking straight. It was just attempting to get them to calm down so that we could then start having conversations about how to troubleshoot and navigate the circumstance. This keeps them engaged in a practical solution.

Demonstrating calmness in the face of crises appears to function as an anchoring presence, helping employees regain focus and shift from reactive to problem-solving mindsets. A calm leadership approach fosters engagement by reducing anxiety and encouraging employees to stay present and participate in resolving the situation. APP3 affirmed ideas about calm leadership, saying,

I think calmness. We run a mentorship program and youth development programs, and so as mentors, the babies are looking at us. Young people are going to respond to the way we react to things, right? If there's a crisis happening, I have to remain calm because employees are looking to me to have some type of form of response.

A calm approach sets a standard for behavior in challenging times, reinforcing employee engagement by modeling constructive responses to adversity. By maintaining composure, leaders serve as role models for employees, setting an example of resilience and thoughtful response that can inspire similar engagement and focus throughout the team.

Some participants emphasized the importance of role modeling in promoting employee engagement. APP3 explained:

Don't just be a role model. Be a real model, as in, you could tell people your accomplishments all day, every day, and that's cool. That's inspiring. But if you really want to connect with someone, tell them what you go through.

By sharing personal challenges rather than only successes, APP3 underscores that authenticity can create deeper connections with employees. APP3's openness helps employees feel understood and valued on a personal level, which in turn enhances their engagement. APP4 also explained that leading by example fosters engagement, saying,

My leadership style is open, honest, and lead by example. If you're not looking at that piece, then you're not invested in the person, and you're not investing in a person, then how are they going to be invested in you?

APP4's perspective highlights that role modeling involves a genuine investment in employees' well-being. When leaders prioritize the person over the task, they demonstrate respect and care, which can increase employees' commitment and engagement. APP4 believed that prioritizing employees' well-being involved remaining vulnerable to employees. APP4 said, "I think when it comes to leadership, I think there has to be a level of vulnerability. I don't know what I don't know, but how do we help each other?" APP4 suggests that vulnerability is an essential component of effective role modeling. APP4's emphasis on vulnerability and genuine care aligns closely with transformational leadership principles.

Some participants described their leadership styles as transformational, highlighting transformational leadership characteristics. As with other participants, AAP8 said, "I'm transformational, leading by example. So, you know, I can't expect anybody to

do something I haven't done or experienced.” AP8 demonstrates idealized influence by setting a strong example through personal commitment and integrity. Idealized influence builds trust and respect as employees observe the leader’s willingness to share in the responsibilities and challenges. By embodying employees’ values, AAP8 inspires employees to engage more fully and align with the organization’s goals.

While APP4 and APP8 explained aspects of idealized influence, APP2 focused on inspirational motivation. APP2 said, “Reminding the team of what the goal is, what we're trying to do to help us to realize that we can't save the world, but we can make a difference.” APP2’s focus on reinforcing the team’s purpose reflects inspirational motivation, a core transformational quality. By helping employees connect with the organization’s broader mission, APP2 instills a sense of purpose, encouraging them to see their work as meaningful. APP6 also explored the influence of inspirational motivation and its influence on employee engagement. APP6 explained:

I think that in times of crisis, it can become easy to become self-absorbed, right? How is this helping me? And I hate to reference it, but it's just reality, even if you're thinking about like covid, right? I'm showing up to work. These folks don't care about me. I'm just here. I'm going to give the bare minimum, but really just helping them to see how much of a benefit they are. I think that people give their best better and their best motivated when you can help them see where they're good, something that they're good at, right? When you can help them see that they're bringing something to the table.

By emphasizing employees' individual strengths and contributions, APP6 uses inspirational motivation to enhance engagement. Emphasizing individual strengths and team well-being also aligns with servant leadership principles.

Some participants described the use of the servant leadership style to engage employees during crises. APP4 said, "I'm one of those leaders that are in a supportive role, not necessarily in that dictatorship where I'm going to tell you what to do, and you do what I say." By adopting a supportive approach rather than a directive one, APP4 emphasizes respect for employees' autonomy, which can foster a sense of mutual trust and shared responsibility. APP6 described combining servant and transformational leadership, saying:

I tend to be somewhere between servanthood and transformational. I believe that in times of crisis, it's important for people that you manage and lead, that they feel like you're in this with them. I found it to be more effective when you're in there with the team. How can I help you? What can I do to help you, you know, reach the goal or achieve what it is that you need to do? And so I'm very much trying to encourage, but also here to serve and to help my team. And I find that you get at least, I've gotten probably the better end of productivity for my team members when they realize that, Oh, she's not just here to tell me to do A, B, and C and get your check, but she cares.

By combining servant and transformational leadership, APP6 fosters a collaborative and supportive environment where employees feel cared for and understood. APP6 found that combining leadership styles enhanced employee morale and

productivity. The examples from Category 1 illustrate how servant leadership, especially when combined with transformational elements, can help engage employees.

Category 2: Crisis Management Through Goal Setting

Some participants talked about the importance of appropriate goal-setting to engage employees during crises. APP5 explained that focusing on small goals can influence employee engagement. APP5 said:

One first thing I do is set small goals. A lot of times, especially when dealing with times in crisis, you start to focus on the big picture as opposed to the immediate one. I try to have us focus on the small goals to make small steps. Reaching small goals keeps us motivated to keep pushing toward the greater goal.

APP5 highlighted the psychological benefits of breaking down larger objectives into manageable tasks, which can help alleviate overwhelming feelings and foster a sense of accomplishment among employees. APP3 affirmed APP6's thoughts, also emphasizing small goals. APP3 said:

Instead of focusing on this big catastrophe that's happening, let's all back up. Let's look at what we can do, what's the low-hanging fruit. What's the stuff that we can reach to, and what stuff that we can accomplish or complete, the small things that we can achieve and complete to keep us going, so that we can kind of take that big issue in small bites.

APP3 explained the value of prioritizing achievable tasks to maintain morale and momentum during challenging times. Setting small goals allows teams to feel productive and engaged despite larger challenges.

Comparison of Theme 1 to the Academic Literature

The findings from Theme 1 align with existing academic literature. Research on leadership during crises highlights the value of calm leadership, with scholars emphasizing that leaders who maintain composure can foster stability and confidence among their teams (Stranzl et al., 2021). For instance, calm leadership allows employees to remain focused and reduces panic, a finding that aligns with the findings of Shufutinsky et al. (2023), who discuss how calm leaders are able to manage collective stress more effectively. In the present study, APP1, APP2, APP3, and APP5 supported the importance of fostering employee resilience by demonstrating how calmness in leadership helps employees to focus on practical solutions rather than succumbing to fear, particularly in high-stress scenarios. The participants' approaches to leadership align with findings that calmness is a stabilizing force and enhances decision-making and team morale under pressure, as employees are likely to mirror the leader's demeanor.

Vulnerability in leadership, as noted by APP4, has gained attention in recent literature as a way to build trust and authenticity. Kotter et al. (2021) argued that when leaders openly share their uncertainties or challenges, they create a culture where employees feel more comfortable expressing their own concerns and collaborating. Vulnerability supports employee engagement and strengthens team bonds, especially in challenging times. The study's findings resonate with those of Kotter et al. (2021), suggesting that leaders who display vulnerability invite employees to contribute more authentically. Vulnerability fosters an environment of mutual support and honesty.

Servant and transformational leadership styles are also well-documented as effective approaches to engage and inspire employees. Servant leadership, noted by APP4, APP6, and APP8, prioritizes the well-being of employees and aligns with Aboramadan et al. (2020, 2022), who argued that leaders create a supportive atmosphere conducive to resilience and engagement by serving employees' needs. Servant leadership can help leaders demonstrate their commitment to employees' well-being, fostering employee engagement.

Setting small, achievable goals during crises is supported in the literature as a powerful way to maintain employee focus and motivation when larger objectives feel overwhelming. Research by Locke and Latham (2002) on goal-setting theory highlights that breaking down tasks into smaller, manageable goals can enhance motivation by providing employees with immediate, attainable benchmarks. Setting small goals is particularly beneficial during high-stress situations, as it allows individuals to see progress and feel a sense of accomplishment, even amidst uncertainty (Jones & Mattie, 2024). Studies on crisis management further confirm that incremental goals help maintain morale (Kotter et al., 2021). Small goals can help employees avoid becoming overwhelmed by the scope of the crisis, focusing instead on achievable actions that foster resilience and momentum within the team.

Comparison of Theme 1 to Transformational Leadership Theory

The findings of Theme 1 directly align with the study's conceptual framework, which consists of transformational leadership theory. Six participants in the study identified themselves as having a transformational leadership style. Transformational

leadership is widely recognized for its emphasis on inspiring and motivating employees through vision and personal development (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2010).

Transformational leadership styles contribute to positive employee outcomes, especially during crises, by focusing on organizational goals and individual empowerment (Khurram & Hasan, 2023). As demonstrated by APP3 and APP6, role modeling supports findings by Bass and Riggio (2010) and Nevarez et al. (2023) that leaders who model desired behaviors encourage employees to adopt similar attitudes and behaviors.

Transformational leadership helps foster a cohesive and motivated team culture.

Under transformational leadership theory, setting small goals aligns with the principle of inspirational motivation, which emphasizes instilling a sense of purpose and direction among followers (Bass, 1990). By breaking down larger objectives into smaller, clear tasks, transformational leaders encourage employees to stay engaged and committed to the overall mission, even when circumstances are challenging (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Deconstructing tasks into manageable units resonates with the transformational goal of empowering employees to contribute meaningfully as leaders communicate a clear, optimistic vision in manageable terms, fostering both confidence and a sense of collective progress. Small goals act as motivational stepping stones, sustaining employee engagement and reinforcing the transformational leader's vision (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Transformational leadership theory suggests that small goal-setting is effective when employees may feel uncertain or overwhelmed in times of crisis.

Theme 2: Team-Building Fosters Employee Well-Being and Engagement

In Theme 1, the participants explored how leadership in times of crisis promotes employee engagement, highlighting servant and transformational leadership as appropriate leadership styles. Theme 2 shows that the participants prioritized mental health and flexibility, created a sense of community, and used team-building activities and mission-driven motivation to maintain high employee engagement and well-being during crises. I developed Theme 2 from six codes organized into two categories, involving the perspectives of all eight participants. Table 3 contains a summary of the codes and categories contributing to Theme 2.

Table 3

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 2

Category	Codes and represented participants
C3. Employee well-being and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging mental health and self-care (AP-P2, P3, P5, P6, P7) • Offering flexible work arrangements (APP4, APP6, APP8) • Providing time off during intense periods (APP1, APP3, APP5)
C4. Employee engagement and motivation strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a sense of community (P2, P3, P5, P6, P8) • Small incentives and team-building activities (P1, P2, P8) • Reinforcing the mission to motivate staff (P1, P3, P5, P8)

Category 3: Employee Well-Being and Support

Some participants highlighted the importance of employee mental health and well-being, particularly during crises. APP2 explained:

We believe in mental health and wellness. We believe that sometimes you have to tap out and then make sure that our staff understands that, hey, we know that sometimes it gets tough, sometimes it can be overwhelming. There's no shame in being and needing to tap out. There's no shame in needing to step back. There's no

shame in needing to get a break. We encourage our employees to take advantage of those opportunities when required. That's one reason our employees regard us well: because we realize that sometimes, in times of crisis, you need to step away.

And so just being willing to give them that space to do that

APP2's statement underscores a commitment to fostering a supportive work environment, recognizing that prioritizing mental health is crucial for employee resilience and productivity. APP3 also emphasized the importance of prioritizing mental health, saying,

[Our organization] does a great job of providing services that we just promote to our team's mental health. If it's community events, if it's just them staying active and being able to enhance their professional career, or anything happening in the community, we typically promote it to our team to leave them better than when we found them.

APP3's focus on holistic employee development demonstrates a proactive approach to mental health, suggesting that the organization values its employees' overall well-being and is dedicated to providing resources that enhance both personal and professional growth, promoting resilience and engagement during crises. APP2's and APP3's insights reveal a shared understanding among participants that supporting mental health is a critical component of engagement, particularly during challenging times.

APP4 expressed similar views to APP2 and APP3 about the importance of prioritizing employees' mental health. APP4 explained:

Mental health has to be a part of the strategy. If your team isn't well personally, and you act like nothing's wrong when that person's going through hell and high water at home and then try to show up to work, it can eat at someone. One of the strategies we put in place early on, and that kind of kept things interesting, was mental health breaks. We would meditate during the middle of the day or have a silent walk. We did focus a lot on mental health.

By acknowledging personal struggles and incorporating mental health breaks, APP4's approach fosters a work environment where employees feel supported, which can strengthen their engagement and sense of commitment to the organization. APP7 indicated that prioritizing employees' mental health directly relates to their engagement. APP7 posed a question: "And if you're not looking at [mental hours], then you're not invested in the person, and you're not investing in a person, then how are they going to be invested in you?" APP7's question highlights the reciprocal nature of engagement, suggesting that an organization's commitment to employees' well-being influences their loyalty and willingness to invest in their work. The insights from APP4 and APP7 underscore the connection between mental health support and employee engagement.

Some participants offered their employees flexibility in scheduled and allowed them to work remotely. APP4 explained:

We have a flexible schedule. It was not like you could only take this week for vacation. We flex. You want to go on a trip, just as long as the work's done. We had a lot of folks during that time that said, hey, I want to go work in Southern California for the week. Is that cool? I don't care where you work. There's always

work. So, I think that creates a level of trust that motivates them to do what they want to do and have that flexibility. Of course, they're going to be motivated to do the work.

APP4 illustrated that flexible scheduling and remote work options can build a sense of trust and autonomy among employees, leading to increased engagement during the COVID-19 crisis. Like APP4, APP6 ensured employees were paid during the crisis and used remote work. APP6 said:

The biggest one, I want to say, is providing flexible work arrangements. For instance, being able to flex your time to handle personal matters or just to say, I mentally need a break, right? Giving them the time and the option to make up their hours or even not handle business such as that.

The approach highlighted by APP4 and APP6 emphasizes organization leaders' commitment to supporting work-life balance, recognizing that flexible work arrangements can help employees manage personal challenges and maintain engagement. The findings suggest that providing flexibility and remote work options can foster a supportive and adaptable work culture that fosters employee engagement.

Some participants emphasized that providing time off to employees during intense periods was an important way non-profit leaders could prioritize employee well-being and support. When asked about other strategies non-profit leaders could use, APP1 said, "Time off during the holiday, significant time off during the holidays, and an expanded list of holidays compared to other employers." APP1's approach highlights the value of rest periods, especially during high-stress times, as a means to support employee well-

being and sustain engagement during crises. APP1 believed that providing employees with time off, in conjunction with continuing to pay employees during sick leave, was important. APP1 said:

I think it's appreciated that we still continue to pay when folks are away for the out-of-office crisis, taking their sick leave time or vacation time. It's not a motivator, but I think it's something that makes it easier, obviously, and the employee relieved.

Maintaining financial stability for employees during crises can help alleviate stress, making it easier for employees to focus on recovery without concern over lost income.

APP4, like APP1, ensured that employees remained at the same salary levels. APP4 said:

I think modified work schedules are important. We had to take time off during the pandemic. You know, I sat down with like the EAP, and it's not unemployment. Say that an employee typically gets 40 hours, but we can only pay for 20 because of slower work. Then, the EAP paid for the others.

The modification to include funding from the EAP program demonstrated organizational commitment to maintaining employee income levels and balancing reduced work demands with continued financial support.

Other participants noted that providing employees with time off during crises to address personal matters increased their engagement. APP6's supervisor gave them time off to help a sick family member, an opportunity they extended to employees. APP6 said:

I remember being overwhelmed because my mom was sick, having a director of finance look at me and say, go home. Take care of your mom. And I was really

confused because I had never been to a workplace that was like that. I gave my employees the same opportunities.

APP6's leadership approach contributed to a supportive work environment where APP6 encouraged employees to prioritize personal responsibilities without feeling conflicted about their work obligations. APP8 also explained that they provided employees with support and time off when needed. APP8 recalled:

Reminding employees that had an EAP because a lot of people don't realize that they have this benefit. It was about reminding them that this does exist, and they should take advantage of it if they're feeling down or anxious about whatever crisis is going on. Another resource would be just, I know, maybe it's not a direct resource, but that flexibility we discussed with schedules and time off. If someone needs time, we let them take it.

APP8 affirmed what the other participants spoke out in the interviews, explaining that focusing on employee mental health was necessary for engagement, which included providing time off during times of intense crisis. According to the participants, allowing employees time to recharge and address personal issues through time off allowed them to maintain focus and engagement during crises.

Category 4: Employee Engagement and Motivation Strategies

The main way the participants promoted employee engagement was by creating a sense of community. APP3 explained that building a community within the organization was a mechanism for fostering engagement. APP3 said, "I think that's our biggest strength is that people are excited to work here. People are excited to come build with

their teammates. We do a lot of intentional team building.” APP3 fosters engagement in their organization by creating a community within the nonprofit, helping employees remain engaged. AP3 further explained:

Being able to build community has always been something that has been a strength of ours, to kind of help people understand that we're not alone and that this work is even probably 10 times more important now than ever because the world kind of shut down and we didn't know what was about to happen.

APP3 illustrated how fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose can enhance employee engagement, as employees feel supported and motivated by their collective mission during challenging times. APP6 believed that fostering a community and family environment promoted engagement. APP6 said, “I've actually hosted quarterly gatherings for my team. I do things like, again, servanthood, type of leadership, like I'll make them gumbo because I want you to know that I appreciate you, or just to spend time and to get to know you.” APP6 explained that personalized gestures and shared experiences create a close-knit environment, enhancing team morale and making employees feel valued. APP6 further explained how a lack of community and team orientation can lead to disengagement. APP6 shared:

Having individuals that worked for companies that did not care about what was going on. They just cared about you being at work; it was a very different culture than working for nonprofits, which tend to be more about the wellness of people, not just who they serve, but they're the people who work for them as well.

The contrast provided by APP6 highlights the positive influence of community-focused cultures on employee commitment and motivation, suggesting that prioritizing employee well-being fosters a deeper connection to the organization. The participants' insights highlight how community-building and team-oriented practices serve as effective tools for maintaining employee engagement, leading to enhanced collaboration and commitment within the organization.

Consistent with the theme of building community, the participants also emphasized the importance of team building activity. APP2 explained, "One thing is regular team building, team building activities, team meetings, individual one-on-one check-ins that can be formal or informal, just checking in about life. Staying engaged with employees helps them stay engaged with us." APP2 believed building a team-oriented environment promoted employee engagement through support and community. APP2's statement suggests that fostering a culture of consistent interaction and support can strengthen employee relationships, creating an environment where individuals feel valued and connected to the organization. APP8 also reinforced a culture of consistent support, explaining, "We're a team. Let's focus on why we're doing what we're doing, and then, you just have to maintain that empathy." APP8's statement highlights that by maintaining empathy and focusing on the shared mission, leaders can enhance engagement and reinforce a collective sense of purpose among team members. The participants collectively used team-building activities and empathetic interactions to create a supportive, cohesive environment that fosters sustained engagement and collaboration.

The participants emphasized the importance of engaging employees by reinforcing the non-profit's mission. APP4 explained, "Most folks that deal in the nonprofit space are in it for the mission, more so than the pay." APP4's statement suggests that employees' connection to the mission is a primary motivator for nonprofit work, indicating that reinforcing connecting to an organization's purpose is vital for engagement. APP1 agreed, explaining engaging employees during crises involves helping them remember the mission of the organization:

I think our focusing on our mission and having a hiring team that is primarily committed to the mission, personally, on a personal level, helps. Often, employees volunteer to be involved in different activities or events that they want to do. So, building a team, a culture of service, a deep commitment to community, and a deep commitment to our mission, and trying to keep the group together. We communicate shared values, a shared mission, and a shared responsibility.

APP1 believed reinforcing employees' commitment to the community and the organization's patrons could help foster engagement during challenging times. By embedding the mission within organizational culture, APP1 emphasized the role of shared values and collective responsibility in fostering employee engagement during challenging times. APP2 affirmed APP1's ideas, saying, "We engaged by connecting them to the mission." APP6, like the other participants, emphasized the importance of connecting to a larger, shared mission, saying:

I think a nonprofit's engagement, for the most part, nonprofits, in my opinion, are mission-driven, right? That's their focus. And I think that the culture of a

nonprofit is often rooted in a passion for the cause. It makes a person have a stronger engagement, even aligning their personal values to the organization and organizational goals.

APP6's statement suggests mission alignment strengthens commitment and deepens employees' investment in their roles. APP7 further affirmed the idea of alignment to the mission, saying, "The culture of your agency is the key for people to stay around a long time, the mission and vision you have. This is who we are, and this is what we are."

APP7's perspective underscores the enduring impact of a mission-centered culture in creating loyalty and long-term employee engagement. The findings indicate that regularly emphasizing the mission strengthens employees' connection to their work, encouraging sustained engagement and resilience through challenging times.

Comparison of Theme 2 to the Academic Literature

Most ideas articulated by the participants in Theme 2 align with the findings in the literature, but some findings represent new ideas regarding the engagement of nonprofit employees during times of crisis. Scholars recognize mental health support and self-care as essential for employee well-being and employee engagement, especially in high-stress environments (Posluns & Gall, 2020). When organization leaders encourage self-care and mental health support, employees experience lower levels of burnout and increased motivation. Moreover, encouraging self-care aligns with established best practices and has been shown to sustain engagement by helping employees manage stress and maintain well-being (Rollins et al., 2021). The participating nonprofit leaders reinforced the findings present in the literature.

Building a strong community and team culture is well-documented in the professional literature as a factor influencing employee engagement. In nonprofit organizations, a collaborative, mission-centered workplace provides social support, reduces feelings of isolation, and reinforces a collective purpose (O'Brien & Craig, 2021). According to the participants, community-building can enhance commitment and resilience by helping employees feel connected to their work and their colleagues, fostering a positive work environment. Emphasizing the mission is another foundational principle among nonprofits. Nonprofit employees are intrinsically motivated by their organization's cause (Prysmakova, 2021). Nonprofit researchers highlight that reinforcing the mission during crises can re-anchor staff, giving employees a renewed sense of purpose and direction. The participants explained that mission-driven engagement is crucial in nonprofits during crises, as it aligns personal values with organizational goals, deepening commitment and emotional investment.

The study's findings in Theme 2 have several emerging concepts not emphasized in the literature. Although flexible work arrangements are common in the broader workforce, the importance of flexible arrangements and schedules in nonprofit engagement during crises is less documented. The finding reflects the recent shift toward remote work and flexible scheduling, often less traditional in nonprofit contexts. Flexibility allows employees to manage personal and professional responsibilities (Chatterjee et al., 2022), which is especially beneficial during crises. Chatterjee et al. (2022) explained that providing employees with flexible work schedules enhances overall

organizational productivity. The participants in the current study highlighted flexibility is a valuable engagement strategy for employees during crises.

Another novel finding is the use of time off from work as a strategic tool to manage nonprofit engagement during crises. The literature primarily addresses burnout prevention but rarely emphasizes planned, intensive time off to help employees recharge during critical periods, as was highlighted by APP1, APP3, and APP5. Offering structured time off during crises acknowledges the intense demands placed on nonprofit staff, showing an organizational commitment to employee well-being and helping prevent burnout.

Analysis of Theme 2 Using Transformational Leadership Theory

Each of the six practices in Theme 2 can be understood through the lens of transformational leadership theory. Transformational leaders demonstrate individualized consideration by addressing employees' personal needs and well-being (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Leaders promoting mental health signal empathy and an understanding of individual challenges, which is important during crises. Promoting employees' mental health also connects to inspirational motivation. Leaders inspire employees to prioritize well-being by normalizing mental health conversations, showing that self-care contributes to the organization's health and mission (Gabriel et al., 2022). By addressing practical and emotional needs, leaders foster a supportive environment that strengthens team resilience and commitment in times of uncertainty. Each practice under transformational leadership encourages a proactive, resilient mindset among employees, aligning personal well-being with the organization's mission and values."

Transformational leadership theory also provides a lens for understanding how offering flexible work arrangements and providing employees with time off during intense periods can lead to employee engagement. Flexibility encourages employees to think creatively about balancing work and personal life, promoting resilience and adaptability (Bjärntoft et al., 2020). Nonprofit leaders offering employees flexible work conditions consequently emphasize intellectual stimulation. Individualized consideration is also a factor because flexible arrangements address individual circumstances, showing leaders value employees' unique needs and situations. Providing time off during intense periods involves idealized influence and responsible leadership that prioritizes sustainability over burnout.

Creating a sense of community and reinforcing the mission to staff show that the participants prioritized inspirational motivation. Fostering community helps employees feel connected to the organization's goals, enhancing engagement and reinforcing a shared vision (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Reinforcing the mission of the nonprofit complements the strategy of fostering community. Reaffirming the mission accesses employees' intrinsic motivation by connecting daily tasks to a broader purpose, increasing resilience and dedication. Both strategies involve inspiring and motivating employees, which the participants' believed helped improve engagement.

Theme 3: Organizational Resilience and Adaptation Foster Engagement

In Theme 2, the participants explained how they prioritized mental health and flexibility, created a sense of community, and used team-building activities and mission-driven motivation to maintain high employee engagement and well-being during crises.

In Theme 3, the participants explored how organizational resistance and adaptation foster employee engagement. I developed Theme 3 from seven codes organized into two categories, involving the perspectives of all eight participants. Table 4 contains a summary of the codes and categories contributing to Theme 3.

Table 4

Codes and Categories Contributing to the Development of Theme 2

Category	Codes and represented participants
C5. Resilience and adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational resilience (AP-P1, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8) • Adaptability of leadership and workflows (AP-P4, P6) • Ensuring resource availability (APP7)
C6. Technology and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology for communication and engagement (AP-P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8) • Transparent communication during crises (AP-P1, P8) • Tailored communication for employee needs (AP-P2, P5, P7) • Open communication & open door policy (AP-P1, P3, P4, P8)

Category C5: Resistance and Adaptability

In Category C5, the participants explored how organizational resistance and adaptability contribute to employee engagement during crises. APP2 explained that organizational resilience provides employees with strength and hope for the future. APP2 said:

The organization I work for currently has been around for 24 years, serving the community. I wasn't there for the whole 24 years, but I've heard stories of how the organization had to navigate from when they were going to Dollar Tree to provide supplies to the program to now having a multi-million dollar budget annually. Letting our employees know that we've stood the test of time. We've made it through meager beginnings. We've made it through the housing crisis, the

economic downturn of 2008, through Covid, and we're still an organization still standing. The reassurance that you're connected to an organization that is that we're strong can be helpful.

The connection to organizational history described by APP2 fosters a sense of security and pride among employees, reinforcing their commitment during crises. The emphasis on resilience allows employees to see themselves as part of a large narrative, which can help provide motivation when facing challenging situations. Participant APP3 believed that the leadership's personal resilience helped foster organizational resilience that influenced the employees. APP3 said:

Me and my co-founder, we all have a story. We all come from something, and we all have reasons why we are the way we are, for good, bad, and ugly. I think we've been resilient with our own stories. We've been resilient when it comes down to the pandemic that was supposed to shut us down, and it blew us up. Our employees are able to use their stories as power.

Like APP2, APP3 highlighted how leaders' stories of resilience can inspire employees, creating a culture where individuals are encouraged to harness their own experiences as sources of strength. APP2 and APP3 showed how personal and organizational resilience contribute to employee engagement during crises.

APP5 explored the influence of organizational resilience on trust. APP5 said, "I think that resilient organizations build trust. Employees are more engaged when they see organizations handle crisis effectively." APP5's statement highlights the role of resilience in building trust, as employees are more likely to engage when they see the organization

handling crises with stability and confidence. Trust is foundational, reassuring employees that they are part of an organization capable of withstanding challenges. APP5 also connected the resilience of leaders to adaptability, which further promotes employee engagement. APP5 explained, “I think that resilience often gives adaptability. When employees see leaders make smart adjustments, it makes their commitment to the company more involved.” By observing leaders’ adaptability, APP5 explained that employees feel more connected to the organization, fostering a deeper commitment and shared responsibility for success. APP7 explored employee engagement by discussing the lack of organizational resilience. APP7 said:

Well, you can see those by losing programs. One of the big things about nonprofits is that we are government-funded. So when this funding goes away, you have people whose livelihoods are on the line. You lose that staff who's been there 15-20 years, and they take all their skills and talents to an agency you're going to be competing against for funding. You have to treat people as you want them to be effective in your agency, and they have to have value.

APP7’s perspective contrasts that of APP5 and underscores the negative influence of a lack of resilience. When funding and resources are unpredictable, employees may feel devalued or insecure, leading to disengagement as experienced staff leave for more stable opportunities. A lack of organizational resilience can weaken a nonprofit leader’s capacity to retain talent and effectively fulfill its mission.

The adaptability of leadership was another facet the participants believed was critical for employee engagement. APP2 emphasized their adaptability, explaining:

I think that trying to be adaptable to other people's personalities or their communication styles or realizing that because of life experiences, some things trigger others that they may not trigger some. Being adaptable and acknowledging that certain people may require more time based on personality.

APP2's perspective underscores the importance of leadership adaptability, which involves recognizing and responding to individual differences among employees. APP2 believed that a personalized approach allows employees to feel seen and valued while fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment. APP7 also emphasized adaptability in leadership. APP7 said:

At times, someone has a death in the family, has a sickness, or has a crisis. I built up a system internally to make sure they're getting the resources they need. I meet with all the staff. I like to meet them more frequently and check-in. I do daily check-ins on anything they need at the end of the day. Those internal pieces are so important to make sure they're taking care of themselves.

APP7 highlighted the importance of leadership adapting to the individual needs of employees, which fosters engagement by promoting well-being. The study's participants collectively indicated that by adapting communication and interactions based on unique needs, triggers, and situations, leaders can create a workplace where employees feel respected and understood, which is crucial during crises

Category C6: Technology and Communication

The participants emphasized that technology was an important aspect of employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. APP2 believed that technology helped

foster a sense of community that promoted engagement during the pandemic. APP2 explained:

One of the things I wanted to create was a central communication platform or a central community where we could all communicate without having to be in the same spot. That involved seeking out an app, finding an app, and creating a group within the app for us to continue communication. We were able to conduct many of our leadership meetings and training, stay in communication, continue to plan, and continue working outside of the building using Zoom as a platform.

APP2's initiative to create a central communication platform demonstrates how technology can bridge physical gaps, fostering a sense of community even during remote work. Implementing platforms like Zoom helped APP2 maintain continuity in meetings, planning, and training, which APP2 believed was vital for sustaining engagement and collaboration. APP3 also emphasized the importance of using technology as a tool to facilitate communication and engagement during crises. APP3 said, "In-house technology has been key to keeping the connections going even when we're not in the same space or even if we're not in the same region. Those human connections are key." Like APP2, APP3 highlighted the role of technology in maintaining human connections despite physical distance. Consistent connectivity helped reinforce relationships and unity, essential components of employee engagement during a crisis. APP2 and APP3's insights demonstrate how technology, when strategically integrated, can be a powerful tool for sustaining engagement and fostering a connected, resilient team during challenging times.

APP2 and APP3 found that the use of technology allowed their organizations to remain productive during the COVID crisis. APP3 explicitly connected technology to employee engagement, saying, “Technology has been big for us being able to figure out ways to be innovative on how we bring people in. This feels like family. This feels like a community. This feels like home.” APP3 explained that technology helped foster a sense of belonging and innovation within the organization, making employees feel like part of a close-knit community while physically apart. APP3 believed feelings of connection promoted engagement by helping maintain morale and organizational involvement. APP6 affirmed the importance of using technology to engage employees, saying:

So, quite a bit of technology. I definitely would use Zoom. That is beneficial, especially with everyone working from home on Fridays. We maximize time by holding most of the meetings on those days when people can be more comfortable. Also, Google Meet has been a great, great tool because you can log in right there from your computer.

APP6’s emphasis on convenience through tools like Zoom and Google Meet reinforced that making virtual meetings accessible and comfortable for employees encouraged their active participation and commitment, contributing positively to engagement. Like the other participants, technology was an important strategy for APP8 in engaging employees during the pandemic. APP8 said, “Absolutely, Zoom, Google chats, Google Meet, whatever technology tools are there to bring people together.” Like the other participants, APP8’s use of various digital tools leveraged technology to sustain communication and cohesion during remote work, keeping employees connected and engaged. The

participants' perspectives highlight how technology can facilitate productivity and create an adaptable, inclusive work environment that strengthens employee engagement.

Some participants emphasized the importance of communication during crises, with different participants offering opinions about different communication styles. APP6 found that open and transparent communication facilitated engagement during crises.

APP6 said:

Being able to have regular check-ins to assess their well-being and engagement, having transparent and open communication with them, and ensuring that we can get honest communication. Transparent communication makes it easy for us to communicate back and forth and for me to be honest with them.

APP6's emphasis on open and transparent communication underscored the importance of trust and honesty during crises. By creating regular opportunities for employees to share their thoughts and well-being openly, APP6 fostered an environment where employees feel supported and engaged. APP8 agreed with APP6 and added that leaders should provide employees with opportunities to discuss concerns without being overly intrusive.

APP8 said:

Leaders need an open-door policy to foster communication. During a crisis, I guess it reinforces the fact that that policy exists. People need to hear it over and over again so that they feel comfortable and don't feel like they're intruding. They should be able to knock on your door and say, "Hey, this is what's going on," or send you an email, "Hey, can we have a Zoom chat?"

APP8 built on APP6's thoughts by highlighting the importance of accessibility and reassurance through an open-door policy. Repeatedly reinforcing the open-door policy helped employees feel safe voicing concerns without feeling intrusive, promoting engagement and psychological safety. The participants' approaches suggest that transparent, accessible communication helps build trust and security, essential components for maintaining engagement during challenging times.

Comparison of Theme 3 to the Academic Literature

Several findings in Theme 3 align with the current knowledge in the professional literature. Scholars consistently emphasize that open and transparent communication is essential in maintaining employee engagement during crises (Einwiller et al., 2021). Erikson (2021) and Ruppel et al. (2022) showed that transparent communication fosters trust and reduces anxiety, directly impacting employee engagement in organizational settings. APP6 and APP8's emphasis on transparent communication aligns with the body of literature, reinforcing that clear, regular communication helps employees feel secure and supported.

The use of technology as a tool for engagement has also received attention in recent literature. Literature on virtual teamwork and digital communication tools supports the participants' experiences with using technology to help engage employees. For example, Adisa et al. (2021) found that technology enables continuity, productivity, and team cohesion during remote work. APP2, APP3, and APP6's use of technology for communication and collaboration aligns with the findings from the literature, underscoring technology's capacity to sustain engagement and a sense of community

when in-person interaction is limited. Neshor Shoshan and Wehrt (2022) caution against the overuse of technology, describing how remote workers can experience Zoom fatigue. Taser et al. (2022) also found that many employees experienced technostress due to remote work during the pandemic. It may become important for leaders to balance competing influences when designing employee engagement strategies during remote work.

Theme 3 has several new insights that contribute to the knowledge present in the literature. APP8's insight into the importance of reinforcing the open-door policy digitally introduces a nuanced approach not widely covered in the literature. Traditional studies on open-door policies address physical workplace settings (e.g., Waterford & Disele, 2024). APP8's perspective suggests that reiterating leaders' accessibility in virtual environments is crucial. Adapting the open-door policy to the digital workplace is relevant in organizational settings, where digital reassurances may be needed to make employees feel as comfortable reaching out as they would in a physical office. Some employees may perceive a digital divide can be mitigated through the reinforcement of a digital open-door policy.

Nonprofit organizations are often considered mission-oriented environments, drawing employees empowered by public service. APP3's description of creating a family or community feeling through technology introduces a new dimension to existing research. Prior scholars discussed how technology can maintain organizational productivity (e.g., Lakhwani et al., 2020), but few studies explored how technology can cultivate a family-like atmosphere. The opposite trend is prevalent in the literature,

highlighting how technology can create a digital rift in the workplace (Lythreatis et al., 2020). The findings from Theme 3 add to the literature by showing that technology can actively foster emotional bonds and a supportive culture that is valuable during crises.

Analysis of Theme 3 Under Transformational Leadership Theory

The participants emphasized each aspect of transformational leadership in their discussion of Theme 3. Transparent communication and reinforcing organizational stability through communication connect to idealized influence. APP6's emphasis on transparent and honest communication reflects directly idealized influence, where leaders set an example through integrity and openness. Leaders reinforce a culture of trust and ethical leadership by regularly updating and checking in with employees (Al Halbusi et al., 2021). Transparent communication can inspire employees to align their behavior with the values of ethical leadership, knowing that leaders act with integrity even during uncertainty. APP3's use of technology to emphasize a sense of community and family also reflects idealized influence. APP3 exemplifies a commitment to a stable, supportive work culture and reinforces employees' faith in the organization's resilience, helping them remain engaged and hopeful. The participants' strategies for employee engagement closely align with idealized influence.

The participants' strategies also included aspects of inspirational motivation. The participants tried to use technology to maintain cohesion, conduct meetings, and plan initiatives. Scholars focusing on leadership theory consistently explain that leaders who communicate resilience and stability during crises can inspire employees to stay motivated and committed to organizational goals (Dirani et al., 2020). APP3's comments

about fostering a family atmosphere through technology capture the focus on inspirational motivation by connecting employees emotionally to a shared vision and purpose during difficult times. APP8's virtual open-door policy also reinforces a culture where employees feel their concerns are valid and valued. By consistently making themselves accessible, leaders inspire employees to believe in a positive, supportive workplace (Moore et al., 2020). The participants' vision of inclusivity and openness motivates employees to stay engaged and invested in the organization's success.

The participants explored intellectual stimulation by adapting their communication styles and promoting innovation and adaptability with technology. APP2's approach to adapting communication to individual needs reflects intellectual stimulation, where leaders challenge conventional methods and encourage personalized solutions (Bass & Riggio, 2010). Leaders can foster engagement through creative and flexible approaches by recognizing and addressing employees' unique personalities, especially during a crisis when standard methods may not be available or effective. The participants' use of technology to engage employees remotely also reflects intellectual stimulation. The participants modeled adaptability and encouraged employees to embrace new tools and think innovatively about maintaining engagement and productivity under unique circumstances. Adaptability stimulates a problem-solving mindset, which helps employees feel empowered and resourceful (Deep, 2023). The participants' use of technology during the pandemic reflected intellectual stimulation, assisting employees to think creatively.

Theme 3 also explored the participants' commitment to individualized consideration. APP6's focus on regular check-ins to assess well-being aligns with the concept of personalizing leadership attention to each employee. Transformational leaders prioritize each employee's experience (Bass & Riggio, 2010), which can be useful during crises when personal circumstances will likely vary. An individualized approach supports engagement by making employees feel valued and personally respected. APP8's open-door policy in virtual settings reflects individualized consideration by giving employees a clear way to raise concerns in digital settings. Flexible communication options like Zoom or email can allow leaders to demonstrate sensitivity to each employee's preferences and comfort levels. The participants emphasized that a tailored approach to support fosters a trusting environment, making employees more likely to remain engaged and connected.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Practice

The study's findings provide several contributions to the body of research on employee engagement in nonprofit organizations. A novel contribution of Theme 1, Leadership and Crisis Management through Goal Setting, centers on how diverse leadership styles and goal-setting approaches uniquely influence employee engagement within nonprofit organizations during times of crisis. Much of the existing literature on crisis management and employee engagement focuses on either transformational or servant leadership (Aboramadan et al., 2020, 2022; Khurram & Hasan, 2023). Theme 1 highlighted how a combination of styles, including inclusive, adaptive, transformational, and servant leadership, collectively contributes to employee engagement in crises. In particular, combining inclusive and adaptive leadership with transformational leadership

styles could be a unique finding, as nonprofit leaders may feel greater pressure to connect authentically with employees during crises and adapt to their needs. Vulnerability in leadership, explored by APP4, is less explored in traditional business literature, especially in the context of crisis management. APP4 suggested that by openly acknowledging uncertainties or challenges, leaders can foster a deeper level of trust and commitment from employees. Vulnerability could represent a humble approach to leadership not traditionally acknowledged in the literature as important during crises.

Goal setting is a well-documented method to drive performance. In Theme 1, APP2, APP3, and APP5 highlighted that focusing on small, achievable goals in crises was a key leadership strategy. In crisis situations, particularly within nonprofits where resources are often limited, focusing on incremental goals can reduce employee stress and create quick wins that sustain morale. Focusing on small goals may be a unique adaptation of traditional goal-setting theory, emphasizing that small, immediate successes can help employees and teams maintain engagement and focus under crisis conditions. By breaking down objectives into manageable steps, leaders can help employees feel a sense of progress and control, mitigating overwhelming feelings and reinforcing commitment to the organization's mission.

Mental health and work-life balance have become increasingly prominent in recent research. Researchers mainly focused on how mental health and work-life balance contribute to employee well-being (Kirby et al., 2023; Riforgiate & Kramer, 2021), not necessarily on employee engagement. Theme 2 suggests that nonprofits can use mental health support and flexible work arrangements as crisis-response strategies. The

participants explained that encouraging mental health and self-care and offering flexibility in work schedules address specific stressors employees face in mission-driven environments during crises. The findings regarding work-life balance and flexible work arrangements contribute to the literature by showing that in nonprofits, employee well-being is directly linked to organizational resilience, with flexibility and mental health support acting as crisis-specific tools for engagement.

According to the participants, reinforcing the mission is a primary engagement strategy in many nonprofits. Theme 2 underscored the importance of the strategy during crises. The participants discussed how leaders who continually highlight the organization's mission can help employees connect their daily efforts with a greater purpose, facilitating motivation during challenging periods. Unlike in for-profit contexts where financial and career growth incentives are often primary motivators, mission reinforcement is a motivational and resilience-building tool in nonprofits. The finding that mission alignment contributes to employee engagement adds to the literature by highlighting that engagement is less about individual gain and more about collective purpose, which nonprofit leaders can emphasize to sustain commitment.

Theme 3 showed that technology in nonprofits builds trust and reinforces stability. The literature on remote work highlights the importance of technology in organizational productivity (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Theme 3 explored how resilient organizations build trust through effective crisis management and demonstrated that technology can support engagement by showing employees that the organization is stable and capable. The connection between technology and trust could be an addition to

professional knowledge, especially for nonprofits where employee engagement often hinges on alignment with the organization's mission. Nonprofit leaders can demonstrate resilience, reassure employees, and maintain engagement by using technology effectively in times of uncertainty.

Recommendation 1: Use Technology to Foster Community and Connection

Nonprofit leaders can strategically use technology platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and team collaboration applications to foster a sense of community while enhancing organizational and operational productivity. Leaders can create dedicated virtual spaces for employees to connect, share updates, and celebrate small wins to sustain engagement. Leaders can also use virtual spaces to facilitate an open-door policy within the digital workplace to enhance employee trust and confidence. Prioritizing platforms supporting social interaction and team cohesion can help leaders ensure that employees feel connected to the leadership and to the organization, reinforcing a sense of belonging and unity that is critical for resilience.

Recommendation 2: Reinforce Open-Door Policies in Virtual Settings

One prominent finding was the participants' use of an open-door policy in virtual settings to foster employee engagement. Leaders should actively reiterate their availability for discussions with employees and their commitment to open-door policies in virtual work environments. An open-door policy can reduce employee anxiety and encourage open communication. Leaders can implement the recommendation of an open-door policy easily by reminding employees through emails or at team meetings that they can reach out for support, share concerns, or request one-on-one virtual check-ins.

Consistently reinforcing accessibility can help leaders foster an inclusive, supportive culture where employees feel safe and valued. Psychological safety can in turn increase engagement and reduce feelings of isolation during crises.

Recommendation 3: Adapt Communication Styles to Meet Individual Needs

The participants highlighted the importance of communication in navigating times of crisis but explained that individual employees required different styles of communication under stress. Nonprofit leaders can tailor their communication to address individual team members' unique personalities and needs. Leaders can accommodate different preferences and stress responses by offering varied communication options, including one-on-one meetings, group check-ins, informal conversations, and open forums. A personalized approach can help employees feel understood and respected, enhancing engagement and reducing stress. Leaders should be flexible in their communication methods to foster an environment where employees feel valued, which is essential for sustained commitment and productivity during crises.

Implications for Social Change

Nonprofit organizations often work on the front lines of social issues, addressing critical needs like healthcare, education, social justice, and poverty alleviation. Employees in nonprofit organizations face unique pressures due to limited resources, high emotional demands, and a strong commitment to mission-driven work (Philip & Arrowsmith, 2021). The study's findings emphasized that prioritizing employee mental health, self-care, and flexibility during crises helps nonprofit leaders cultivate a resilient workforce equipped to handle pressure. Leaders' focus on employee well-being directly

benefits individual employees and indirectly strengthens the nonprofit organization's ability to deliver services effectively. Healthier, more supported employees are more productive, engaged, and capable of making a meaningful difference in the communities they serve. Prioritizing employee well-being reflects a long-term commitment to sustaining the impact of nonprofit work, ensuring that those who drive social missions are cared for and prepared to continue their vital contributions.

Leaders' emphasis on transparent, open communication and personalized support directly impacts nonprofit organizations where employees often work closely with leadership and need to feel connected to the organization's mission. Employee engagement and retention are critical for nonprofits because high turnover can disrupt service continuity and erode institutional knowledge (Friedman, 2023). Nonprofits can improve employee retention and build a workforce deeply committed to the organization's mission by fostering environments where employees feel safe, valued, and able to express their needs. An inclusive and trusting culture can strengthen the nonprofit sector's capacity to serve society. When employees feel respected and included, they are more likely to stay engaged and dedicated, enhancing the organization's consistency and impact in communities. One organization's approach to fostering inclusive environments can also inspire other organization leaders to adopt similar practices, contributing to a broader culture of empathy and support across the nonprofit sector.

The participants emphasized that nonprofit organizations inherently attract individuals motivated to make a positive difference in society. The study's findings showed that using technology and communication strategies to reinforce the

organization's mission helps employees remain connected to a larger purpose. Facilitating a connection to purpose is uniquely powerful in nonprofits, where employees' daily efforts contribute directly to social impact (Friedman, 2023). Nonprofits can strengthen bonds and enhance employees' sense of belonging and mission-aligned commitment by creating a cohesive community atmosphere, even in virtual spaces. The findings suggest that employees who feel deeply rooted in an organization's mission are more likely to stay engaged and innovate, amplifying the organization's reach and effectiveness in addressing social challenges. Mission-driven engagement benefits the internal culture of the nonprofit while translating to greater commitment and service to communities, reinforcing the organization's purpose and its role in driving long-term social change.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings highlight important additions to the academic and professional literature but also open more questions that require additional research. The study's findings explained how different leadership practices and styles contribute to engagement during crises. Future research could examine the long-term effects of different leadership styles on employee retention, commitment, and resilience beyond crisis periods. Researchers could conduct a longitudinal study assessing how different leadership styles influence such variables over time. Such a study could help determine whether crisis-informed leadership practices lead to lasting engagement or if other approaches are more sustainable over time.

The participants explained that mental health and self-care are crucial for nonprofit employees facing high-stress, mission-driven work. Future studies could explore how specific well-being initiatives, such as mental health days, counseling services, or flexible work policies, influence employee engagement, organizational effectiveness, and community impact. Researchers could conduct either a quantitative or qualitative study to affect workplace initiatives' breadth or individual influence. Such research could provide a data-driven understanding of how investing in employee well-being benefits nonprofits' ability to achieve their missions within and outside of crises.

An interesting finding of the present study was that technology can foster community among employees. With technology becoming central to remote work, future research could explore how specific digital tools influence engagement, cohesion, and community-building within nonprofit teams. Researchers could conduct multiple comparative studies varying different constructs. In one study, researchers could compare the influence of different virtual communication platforms and collaboration applications. Comparative studies across various types of nonprofits (e.g., healthcare vs. social justice) could also shed light on best practices for using technology to foster a strong, mission-driven culture in hybrid or fully remote environments.

Conclusion

The study highlighted the critical role of leadership, support for employee well-being, and communication strategies effective in sustaining employee engagement within nonprofit organizations during crises. The primary conclusion of the study is that nonprofit leaders can foster a resilient, mission-aligned workforce capable of

withstanding uncertainty by integrating leadership approaches that prioritize strength, vulnerability, and individualized support. Nonprofit leaders should emphasize employees' mental health, workplace flexibility, and a sense of community to ensure that employees feel valued and supported, enhancing their well-being and strengthening their commitment to the organization's mission. Nonprofit leaders can also maintain connectivity and cohesion through innovative uses of technology, reinforcing the organization's purpose and fostering a supportive atmosphere in remote, hybrid, or challenging work conditions.

The findings from the study contribute valuable insights to the literature on nonprofit employee engagement by demonstrating that engagement strategies should transcend beyond organizational productivity to address emotional resilience, inclusivity, and mission alignment. Future research could explore how the strategies identified in the study influence long-term engagement, retention, organizational effectiveness, and cross-sector applicability. Nonprofits will continue to address complex social issues, necessitating employee engagement strategies that lead to a strong and motivated workforce. Nonprofit leaders can enhance the positive impact of an organization on communities in need by prioritizing employee health and well-being. The study's findings reinforce that a mission-driven, well-supported workforce is essential for sustaining meaningful social change in times of crisis.

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter

There is a new study about employee engagement strategies for nonprofit organizations during times of crisis that could help business leaders better understand effective strategies that can be implemented in the future to sustain employee engagement during a crisis. For this study, you are invited to describe your experience supporting employee engagement during times of crisis.

About the study:

- One 30-60 minute Zoom interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording)
- You would receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank-you
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Business leader of a small nonprofit organization
- At least 4 years of experience in management
- A business leader of a small nonprofit in Northern California

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Andrea Purnell, a DBA student at Walden University.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.</p>	<p>Hello, my name is Andrea Purnell. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore the effective employment engagement strategies used by leaders of small nonprofit organizations during times of crisis.</p> <p>I am going to ask you nine questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview.</p> <p>With your permission, I'd like to audio record our conversation to ensure accuracy. Your responses will be kept confidential, and your identity will not be revealed in any research reports.</p> <p>Do you consent to this recording?</p> <p>Do you have any questions before we begin?</p>
<p>Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth</p>	<p>Interview Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What strategies do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations? 2. What leadership styles do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations? 3. What motivational strategies do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations? 4. Can you provide examples of specific strategies or initiatives you implemented to enhance organizational sustainability

	<p>during a crisis?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. What resources do you use to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations? 6. What processes or systems do you use to enhance employee engagement? 7. In what way, if at all, does your organizational resilience impact employee engagement? 8. In what ways does your organizational culture impact employee engagement? 9. Is there anything else you can tell me about strategies to enhance employee engagement during crisis situations that I did not ask about?
<p>Wrap up the interview thanking participant.</p>	<p>Thank you for your participation. Your input is essential to my research project.</p>
<p>Schedule a follow-up interview to perform member checking with the participant.</p>	<p>As mentioned earlier, I'll be analyzing the information you and others provide. I'll be in touch within a week to schedule a follow-up interview where we can review my interpretations of your responses to ensure accuracy.</p> <p>Do you have any questions about what happens next or how this information will be used?"</p>

Appendix C: Member Checking Documents

Participant APP1

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Additional follow-up questions are embedded. Thank you!

- *Open communication:* Regular and transparent communication through emails and text messages, especially during weather-related events or other crises.
- *Remote work options:* During COVID-19, one organization implemented full-time remote work, while another adopted a mixed approach with periodic testing as the virus subsided.
- *Testing protocols:* When necessary, daily or weekly COVID-19 testing was implemented, eventually transitioning to testing based on symptoms or exposure.
- *Calm leadership:* During crises, the participant emphasized demonstrating strength and confidence to reduce employee anxiety, even if they had personal concerns.
- *Compensation support:* Continued paying employees during crises, using sick leave or vacation time, helping ease concerns even if not a direct motivator.
- *Technology reliance:* Utilizing technology (emails, text messages, and Zoom meetings) to maintain engagement and operations during crises.
- *PPE provision:* Providing personal protective equipment (PPE), such as COVID tests and masks, when required during crises.
- *Staff engagement practices:* Regular all-staff meetings, weekly departmental meetings, and one-on-one meetings between managers and their direct reports.
- *Incentives for engagement:* Offering incentives like breakfasts, lunches, off-site excursions, and additional holidays, including time off during the holiday season.
- *Organizational culture:* Emphasizing a strong focus on the organization's mission, hiring individuals personally committed to the mission, and fostering a culture of service and community involvement.

Participant APP2

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Additional follow-up questions are embedded. Thank you!

- *Shifting focus:* During crisis situations, you try to shift employees' focus away from immediate overwhelming issues to help them stay calm and refocus.
- *Verbal reassurance:* Asking questions to help employees mentally step back from the problem and focus on the broader mission or smaller tasks at hand.
- *Calm leadership style:* You adopted a laid-back, easygoing demeanor during crises to reduce employee anxiety and prevent escalation, though they adjust their approach depending on the employee's personality and communication style.
- *Tailoring communication:* You tailored your communication style for employees who may be more high-strung or triggered by crises, asking probing questions and providing patience to help them process emotions.
- *Use of small goals:* To keep employees motivated during crises, you focused on setting small, achievable goals to prevent employees from being overwhelmed by the bigger picture.
- *Technology for communication:* You used video conferencing, apps, and telecommunication tools to maintain communication and engagement during times of physical separation, such as during COVID-19.
- *Creating a sense of community:* Even when employees couldn't gather in person, you prioritized creating a sense of community through constant communication and virtual meetings.
- *Support and mental health:* You encouraged employees to take care of their mental health by tapping out or taking breaks when necessary, fostering an environment where stepping away from work in times of crisis is not stigmatized.

Participant APP3

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Calm leadership:* Staying calm is essential when employees look up to leaders for direction during crises. This calmness helps employees, particularly those working with youth, maintain composure.
- *Debriefing with staff:* After crisis situations, you ensure debriefing with staff to check on their well-being and mental health.
- *Offering time off and support:* Providing employees with time off and checking in on their mental health after intense situations (e.g., incidents involving violence at schools) is crucial for maintaining staff well-being.
- *Open communication:* Regularly checking in with staff through open conversations to support them emotionally and mentally, recognizing the emotional weight of their work.
- *Humanizing the work:* Acknowledging that the work is challenging and requires a heart for service while also recognizing that staff have their limits and need support.
- *Decompressing and recharging:* Emphasizing the importance of breaks, remote work options, and decompression time, particularly during school breaks and the off-season, to prevent burnout.
- *Leadership through role modeling:* Using a three-part leadership style—modeling expectations, working side-by-side, and letting staff lead when they're ready—to enhance engagement.
- *Storytelling for motivation:* You enhance engagement using stories and empathy to remind employees of the impact of their work, focusing on the reasons they do it and the positive outcomes they create.
- *Self-care promotion:* Encouraging staff to take care of themselves with breaks, walks, and creating a relaxed work environment to improve overall engagement and mental health.
- *Partnerships and funding security:* Securing partnerships and funding to ensure job stability, which keeps employees motivated and reassures them about their financial well-being during crises.

- *Technology and communication tools:* Utilizing technology (e.g., video conferencing, communication platforms, and Spark Hire for recruitment) to maintain employee engagement and connectivity, even across regions.
- *Organizational culture:* Fostering a positive, authentic culture that feels like a family, where team building is frequent, and team members are encouraged to bring their whole selves to work.
- *Empowering employees through personal stories:* Encouraging staff to use their personal stories as fuel for their work and to connect with others, building resilience through shared experiences.
- *Resilience and adaptability:* The organization's resilience in overcoming challenges (e.g., the pandemic) inspires employees, showing them that they are part of a stable and adaptable team.
- *Competitive pay and bonuses:* Offering competitive pay and bonuses to keep employees motivated and engaged during challenging times.

Participant APP4

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Vulnerability in leadership*: During crises like COVID-19, you emphasized being open and vulnerable with employees, acknowledging uncertainty and creating a supportive environment by focusing on the person first before their role.
- *Emphasizing personal well-being*: Regular check-ins with staff focused on their mental and emotional well-being helped maintain engagement and morale.
- *Flexible work arrangements*: Offering remote work options and flexible schedules allowed employees to manage their personal lives while staying engaged with their work, creating a level of trust and motivation.
- *Collaborative work culture*: The organization used a democratic process to create and adjust core values collaboratively, ensuring that processes didn't burn out employees.
- *Use of external resources*: Leveraging external resources, such as the Employment Development Department (EDD), helped ensure that employees continued to receive partial pay during times of reduced work, contributing to organizational sustainability.
- *Open communication tools*: The organization used Slack and Asana to maintain constant communication and project workflows, ensuring employees stayed connected and aligned, even when working remotely.
- *Weekly meetings for team cohesion*: Regular weekly meetings where wins were celebrated helped foster a supportive team environment and employee engagement.
- *Organizational resilience*: The organization's relatively short history (three years) meant employees were engaged by the opportunity to shape its future, despite the lack of long-term stability or benefits like 401(k) plans.
- *Cultural importance*: Organizational culture was emphasized as critical to employee engagement, shaping how people work and stay committed to the mission.
- *Mental health focus*: Incorporating mental health strategies like meditation, mental health breaks, and encouraging staff to care for their well-being helped prevent burnout and foster long-term engagement.

Participant APP5

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Calm leadership:* You remained calm during crises and used their easygoing nature to help employees feel less stressed and frantic. They try to keep employees focused and grounded by asking questions and redirecting attention away from the immediate problem.
- *De-escalation through conversation:* During intense situations, you engage employees in conversation, asking questions to help them verbalize their emotions and regain composure. This process is used especially with staff who are more high-strung or triggered by certain crises.
- *Tailoring communication styles:* You adjust their leadership style based on the employee's personality and response to stress.
- *Setting small goals:* To keep employees motivated during crises, you focus on small, achievable tasks rather than overwhelming them with the bigger picture. This strategy helps maintain motivation and forward progress.
- *Focusing on the organization's mission:* Reminding employees of the organization's goals and limitations helps them stay connected to the broader mission while managing crises.
- *Using technology for communication:* The organization uses technology (e.g., apps, Zoom, video conferencing) to maintain communication and foster a sense of community, particularly during COVID-19.
- *Team building and regular check-ins:* Regular team-building activities, meetings, and check-ins enhance employee engagement and maintain a sense of community.
- *Highlighting organizational resilience:* You emphasized the organization's long history and its ability to survive crises, reassure employees, and help engagement.
- *Family-like organizational culture:* The organization operates with a family-oriented culture, treating employees with care and concern for their well-being.
- *Support and self-care:* It is essential to provide employees with support during crises. The organization encourages employees to take mental health breaks and step away when necessary, without shame, to prevent burnout and ensure long-term engagement.

Participant APP6

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Empathy as a foundation:* You emphasized the importance of being empathetic to employees' fears and uncertainties, especially during crises like COVID-19. Ensuring that employees feel safe and capable of completing their jobs was a priority.
- *Servant and transformational leadership styles:* You identify as having servant and transformational leadership styles. In times of crisis, they lean more toward servant leadership, helping employees and showing support. In non-crisis situations, the focus is more on transformational leadership, encouraging employees' growth.
- *Motivation through purpose:* You motivate employees by helping them see the value they bring to the team and how their unique skills and personality contribute to the organization's mission. They believe people are more engaged when they understand their purpose and how they make a difference.
- *Quarterly gatherings and one-on-one meetings:* To maintain organizational sustainability, you host quarterly gatherings (e.g., making gumbo for the team) and conduct regular one-on-one check-ins with employees to understand their needs and make necessary adjustments. They emphasize the importance of being adaptable and restructuring workflows when needed.
- *Technology and flexible work arrangements:* You use tools like Zoom and Google Meet to keep employees connected, especially when working from home. You also offer flexible work arrangements, allowing employees to handle personal matters or take mental health breaks while making up hours as needed.
- *Regular feedback and recognition:* You use one-on-one meetings to regularly check in on employees' well-being and give honest feedback. Recognizing employees' contributions is a key strategy for maintaining engagement.
- *Resilience builds trust:* You believe that an organization's resilience during crises builds trust and motivates employees. Knowing that a nonprofit has survived previous challenges, gives employees confidence about weathering future crises.
- *Mission-driven culture:* You emphasized that nonprofit culture is typically rooted in a passion for the cause, which strengthens employees' engagement. Nonprofits often foster a flexible and empathetic work environment where employees feel valued and supported.

- *Leader visibility:* You highlighted the importance of leaders being visible and actively involved in supporting and motivating staff during crises. This includes offering training and development opportunities and peer support to boost morale.

Participant APP7

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Understanding staff strengths and weaknesses:* **You** highlighted the importance of knowing their staff's strengths, triggers, and how they react to different situations. This includes assigning the right people to different types of crises (e.g., fire safety, aggressive clients, or family-related crises).
- *Crisis training and monthly sessions:* The organization holds monthly training sessions focused on different areas like trauma, substance abuse, or fire safety. Each employee is trained according to the type of crisis they may handle, ensuring everyone knows what to do in emergencies.
- *Leadership style during crises:* You emphasized a directive leadership style during crises, where you took charge and ensured all necessary procedures were followed. They also communicated across departments and agencies to ensure all relevant parties were aware of the situation.
- *Motivational strategies through self-care:* You strongly advocate for self-care, ensuring employees take care of their own well-being before dealing with crises. They stress the need to avoid transference or burnout by encouraging staff to look after themselves emotionally and mentally.
- *Organizational culture of support and understanding:* The organization strongly emphasizes values and culture, which are regularly revisited and reinforced to align everyone's approach in crisis situations. You used a system called the PQ (Passion Quotient) to assess staff strengths and keep them focused on roles where they can excel.
- *Providing the right resources:* The organization has a clear protocol for accessing necessary resources (e.g., mental health services, AED machines, or external behavioral health resources). Employees are encouraged to know these protocols and use them when needed.
- *Support systems and teamwork:* In crisis situations, the organization relies on both internal and external resources to provide support. You emphasized teamwork, with

staff working together and making sure everyone is trained and prepared for the types of crises they might face.

- *Nonprofit resilience and sustainability:* spoke about the challenges of government-funded nonprofits and the uncertainty of continuous funding. They emphasized the importance of keeping staff informed about funding challenges and helping them prepare for potential transitions, focusing on retaining experienced staff.
- *Nonprofit culture's impact on employee engagement:* You stressed that without a clear and supportive culture, nonprofits tend to fail. Employees stay longer when they align with the mission and values of the organization. Those who do not fit into the culture tend to leave naturally.

Participant APP8

Thank you so much for participating in my interview. Below is a summary of your main points. I would appreciate it greatly if you could review them for accuracy. Thank you!

- *Empathy, communication, and flexibility:* You emphasized that showing empathy, being transparent about how the crisis affects the organization, and offering flexibility (such as remote work options) are key strategies to enhance employee engagement. You indicated these strategies are effective both during crises and under normal circumstances.
- *Leadership style:* You identified their leadership style as a combination of transformational and servant leadership. You believe in leading by example, engaging with your team, and building trust by showing care and understanding.
- *Motivational strategies:* You use small incentives and challenges to engage employees during crises. In addition, you organize team-building activities (both work-related and non-work-related) to help employees temporarily shift focus away from the stress of the crisis and maintain morale.
- *Specific strategies during COVID-19:* You shared examples of team-building activities, such as trivia games, with gift card rewards to enhance organizational sustainability and employee engagement during remote work caused by the pandemic.
- *Resources:* Technology tools (such as Zoom and Google Chat) were used to maintain engagement, along with reminding employees of available support resources like Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and ensuring regular check-ins. You also stressed flexibility in scheduling as a crucial resource.

- *Processes/systems:* You stressed maintaining an open-door policy to foster communication and providing employees with opportunities to share concerns or seek support. While you valued a non-hierarchical approach to communication, you recognized that larger organizations may need to maintain some hierarchy.
- *Nonprofit organizational resilience:* You highlighted that reinforcing the mission of the nonprofit during a crisis is essential for keeping employees engaged. By reminding staff of their work's impact on the community, employees can find renewed motivation to push through challenging times. Encouraging innovative ideas from employees was also identified as a way to adapt during crises.
- *Nonprofit culture:* You mentioned that a nonprofit's organizational culture, especially one focused on empathy and teamwork, can significantly impact employee engagement. Emphasizing the mission and maintaining empathetic leadership helps employees stay connected to the organization's purpose.
- *Advice for future leaders:* You summarized their key advice for leaders facing crises: emphasize empathy, communication, flexibility, and maintain the focus on the mission. These actions foster cohesion and resilience among the team, helping them stay strong during difficult times.