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Leadership Strategies Nonprofit Leaders Use to Motivate Employees

Clara Dube
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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Clara Dube

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Leadership Strategies Nonprofit Leaders Use to Motivate Employees

by

Clara Dube

MS, Institut Universitaire Kurt Bosch - University of Fribourg, 2011

MS, University of Zimbabwe, 1999

BS, University of Zimbabwe, 1994

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

Unmotivated nonprofit organization (NPO) employees threaten NPO mission fulfillment. NPO leaders are concerned with poor employee motivation as it negatively correlates with organizational performance. Grounded in the integration of self-determination theory and Vroom's expectancy theory, the purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore the leadership strategies that some NPO leaders use to motivate employees. The targeted population was five leaders of an NPO in the Tigray region of Ethiopia who implemented successful leadership strategies to motivate employees. The participants comprised five leaders, purposively selected from an Ethiopian NPO, who had demonstrated the ability to motivate their employees. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and organizational documents. Yin's five-step model guided the data analysis of the case study, resulting in five emergent themes: (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational policy framework and procedure, (c) measuring effectiveness of motivational strategy, (d) alignment with mission values, and (e) promoting employee participation and autonomy. A key recommendation is for leaders in the nonprofit sector to clearly communicate the organization's mission, objectives, beliefs, and a compelling vision to engage employees' passion in fulfilling the mission. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve local society through higher employment rates, increased community volunteerism, and greater economic stability, which could enhance the worth, dignity, and development of individuals and communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral research project to God Almighty for His grace and guidance throughout this journey. I also extend my deepest gratitude to my family. To my mother, Otilia Hazwineyi Njala, whose unwavering values and encouragement instilled in me the determination to persevere through every challenge. Completing this Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program has been a lifelong aspiration, achieved against considerable odds.

To my three children, Isheunesu Tatenda Mapfunde, Kudzaishe Irene Cynthia Mapfunde, and Noluthando Vimbainashe Zama Thango, thank you for your endless love, patience, support, understanding, and prayers, which sustained my motivation. I am equally grateful to my brother, Simplicio Mashanda, for his steadfast love and support.

I acknowledge my friends, Patricia Mushayandevu, Khetho Dlamini, Herbert Makaure, and Dr. Michael Oji, who served as my cheerleaders at different stages of this demanding and seemingly insurmountable journey. Without God's grace and the encouragement of my family and friends, this accomplishment would not have been possible.

The final resolve to complete this case study was fueled by the realization of the significant financial investment and the immense stress endured throughout this process, leaving perseverance as the only viable option. To my future grandchildren, extended family, nieces, nephews, and broader circles of influence: let this achievement serve as a testament that if I could accomplish this goal at the age of 55, you too can achieve anything through hard work, dedication, prayer, and the grace of God.

Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to God for granting me the mental fortitude, as well as the financial and human resources, that sustained me throughout the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) journey and enabled me to realize my long-held aspiration of earning a doctoral degree. I am sincerely grateful to Dr. Ronald Jones, my initial committee chair, whose guidance helped me begin the Capstone process. I also wish to thank Dr. Tim Truitt, who assumed the role of chair after Dr. Jones, and skillfully supported me through the rigor of my Prospectus and guided me to nearly 84% completion of the doctoral research project. Unfortunately, due to a series of regrettable misunderstandings with Walden, I experienced a 4-year delay while attempting to resolve the resulting challenges.

I am profoundly appreciative of Dr. Denise Land, who served as my final chair during the concluding phase of my study after I re-enrolled in 2025. Upon returning to the program, I felt disoriented by the many changes that had occurred. Dr. Land's mentorship, patience, and constructive feedback enabled me to regain momentum and rebuild the confidence necessary to complete this academic endeavor. I am also grateful to the two faculty consultant reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and to the form and style editor for guidance on clarity and formatting.

Finally, I express heartfelt appreciation to the leaders of the participating NGO, my children, family, friends, and colleagues in the doctoral program. Your encouragement in various forms played a meaningful role in the successful completion of this milestone. Thank you all.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Case Study	1
Background of the Problem	1
Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose	2
Sampling Method and Sample Size	2
Data Sources and Data Analysis	3
Conceptual Framework.....	4
Project Research Question	5
Assumptions and Limitations	5
Assumptions.....	5
Limitations	6
Business Project Ethics.....	7
Role of the Researcher	7
Relationships to Topic, Participants, and Context	9
Bias Mitigation.....	9
Ethical Considerations, Oversight, and Informed Consent.....	10
Role of IRB in Ensuring Ethical Conduct.....	11
Informed Consent Process	12
Procedures for Participant Withdrawal.....	12
Incentives	13
Protection of Confidentiality.....	14
Data Storage.....	14

Interview questions	15
Evidence-Based Integrative Review	15
Conceptual Framework	17
Business Problem Scholarship Evidence	26
Business Topic Scholarship	30
Summary	45
Section 2: Primary and Secondary Industry Data Analysis	47
Nature of the Project	48
Research Method and Design	48
Reliability in Qualitative Research: Data Saturation, Member Checking, and Triangulation	49
Population, Sampling, and Participants	51
Population and Sampling Strategy	51
Strategies for Gaining Access to the Selected Participants	54
Strategies for Developing Rapport with the Selected Participants	56
Sample Size and Data Saturation	57
Data Collection Activities	60
Researcher as Primary Data Collecting Instrument (Role and Reflexivity)	60
Semistructured Interviews (Open-Ended Questions & Probes)	61
Interview Protocol and Standardization	61
Recording, Transcription and Field Notes	62
Interview Mode and Duration (Face-to-Face and Virtual)	63

Observations and Archival Documents (Triangulation).....	63
Member Checking (Use and Considerations).....	64
Data Organization and Analysis Techniques.....	65
Data Organization Framework.....	65
Tools: CAQDAS (NVivo) and Complementary Workflows.....	66
Manual Coding with Word/Excel (Resource-Constrained Options).....	67
Privacy, Confidentiality, and Pseudonyms.....	68
Transcription Quality and Audit Trails.....	69
Data Analysis Approaches: Yin’s Case Study Steps, Reflexive TA, and Content Analysis.....	70
Triangulation and Integration Across Sources.....	76
Reliability and Validity.....	77
Summary.....	84
Section 3: Data and Professional Practice.....	86
Project Results.....	86
Theme 1: Leadership Behavior.....	87
Theme 2: Organizational Policy Framework and Procedure.....	98
Theme 3: Measuring Effectiveness of Motivational Strategy.....	104
Theme 4: Alignment with Mission and Values.....	106
Theme 5: Promoting Employee Participation and Autonomy.....	108
Relevance to Scholarship.....	111
Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice.....	122

Implications for Social Change.....	127
Recommendations for Further Study.....	129
Conclusion	132
References.....	136
Appendix A: Interview Questions	182
Appendix B: Interview Protocol.....	183

Section 1: Foundation of the Case Study

Background of the Problem

Employee motivation in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) is a critical yet complex leadership challenge that directly impacts mission fulfillment and organizational performance. Unmotivated nonprofit organization (NPO) employees threaten the fulfillment of the NPOs' mission. Research indicates that poor employee motivation negatively correlates with organizational outcomes (Forner et al., 2021; Karauri & Kyongo, 2024). Employee perceptions of leadership support significantly influence engagement, which in turn affects motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Forner et al., 2021). Recent studies emphasize that motivating employees remains the most essential and difficult leadership function in nonprofits (Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025; Lu, 2025). Ye et al. (2025) found that employees' motivation is strongly tied to feeling valued, being connected to the mission, and receiving recognition from leaders, highlighting the importance of vision, empathy, and spiritual alignment. Conversely, when leaders fail to provide opportunities for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, employees become demotivated (Olafsen & Marescaux, 2025; Paquette et al., 2025). G. G. Anderson and Gilin (2024) stressed the need for further research on leadership strategies that foster motivation in nonprofits. Understanding nonprofit-specific motivational factors is essential for developing effective leadership strategies that enhance employee engagement and organizational success. Additional research is needed to clarify these dynamics and support NPO leaders in fulfilling their missions.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that NPO leaders lack leadership strategies to motivate employees. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore the leadership strategies some NPO leaders use to motivate employees.

Researchers can choose from the three types of available research methods to conduct a study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers seek to gain understanding of a certain population, organization, event, or phenomenon, with the aim to explore through open discourse with participants and an in-depth investigation of multiple sources of evidence (Lim, 2025; Oranga & Matere, 2023). The qualitative method was the appropriate approach for this case study because my purpose was to explore and understand the deeper meaning of a phenomenon regarding leadership and employee motivation through open dialog with participants and an in-depth investigation of relevant supporting documents. I considered three research designs: (a) phenomenology, (b) ethnography, and (c) case study. Researchers use a case study design to explore a real-world problem within a bounded, contextual setting (Dahwa, 2024; Salmons, 2023; Yin, 2018). A case study design was the optimal choice because I was exploring strategies nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees within the nonprofit sector.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

The targeted population was five leaders of an NPO in the Tigray region of Ethiopia who implemented successful leadership strategies to motivate employees. Sampling in this qualitative case study relied on purposeful strategies designed to ensure

transparency, systematicity, and rigor. Purposeful sampling is widely recognized as the most appropriate approach for qualitative inquiries, enabling researchers to select participants who can provide rich, relevant, and in-depth information, with typical sample sizes ranging from 9 to 35 participants depending on methodological needs (Aguboshim, 2021; Bouncken et al., 2025; Ting et al., 2023; Wutich et al., 2024). In this case study, I applied explicit eligibility criteria and systematic access strategies to recruit information-rich participants. Recruitment in qualitative research requires multimodal planning and contextual flexibility to address challenges such as gatekeeping and participant engagement (Archibald & Munce, 2015; Perez et al., 2022). Accordingly, eligible participants were nonprofit business leaders with direct experience in employee motivation and the capacity to provide reflective, detailed accounts of their experiences, consistent with guidance that qualitative samples prioritize knowledgeable and communicative individuals. Access to participants was obtained through direct contact, gatekeeper referrals, and follow-up communication to build rapport and enhance participation, strategies shown to strengthen methodological transparency and recruitment success (see Archibald & Munce, 2015; Perez et al., 2022). By applying these eligibility and access procedures together, I was assured of a rigorous and trustworthy recruitment process aligned with contemporary qualitative standards.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

Data were collected using semistructured interviews and organizational documents. In my case study, I employed a rigorous and reflexive qualitative data-analysis process incorporating thematic analysis, methodological triangulation, and

Yin's five-step model to ensure analytic depth and trustworthiness. Pearson et al. (2025) demonstrated that reflexive thematic analysis can effectively integrate inductive and deductive strategies across cases, yielding within-case insights consistent with Yin's flexible analytic procedures. Similarly, Janis (2022) used concurrent method, source, and data triangulation to achieve dependable thematic saturation across diverse qualitative evidence. Extending this approach, Schlunegger et al. (2024) recommended structured protocols and cross-method comparison to strengthen the credibility of case-study analysis. Guided by these contributions, to facilitate data analysis, I (1) transcribed and anonymized interviews with precision; (2) applied Yin's five-step analytic model to organize, interpret, and synthesize case-based evidence; (3) incorporated reflexive inductive-deductive techniques per Pearson et al. (2025), and Fife and Gossner (2024) to allow thematic patterns to emerge while remaining connected to the analytical framework; and (4) used methodological triangulation during analysis, comparing interviews, field observations, and documentary evidence, guided by Schlunegger et al.'s triangulation frameworks. This structured and reflexive analytic approach strengthened the coherence and credibility of cross-case interpretations while ensuring alignment with established qualitative research standards. Member checking, data saturation, and methodological triangulation were also used as a part of the analysis process to ensure data saturation.

Conceptual Framework

The integration of self-determination theory (SDT) and Vroom's expectancy theory provided a comprehensive framework for understanding employee motivation in

organizational settings. The SDT of motivation emphasized that leaders could foster motivation by satisfying employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Complementing this, Vroom's expectancy theory explains the cognitive process underlying effort, suggesting that employees are motivated when they believe their effort will lead to performance, which in turn will result in valued outcomes (Vroom, 1964). By combining these two theories, the framework addresses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of motivation.

Project Research Question

What leadership strategies do NPO leaders use to motivate employees?

Assumptions and Limitations

Researchers acknowledge that studies inherently involve assumptions and limitations that influence the validity and generalizability of their findings (Gardner & Johnson, 2015). Assumptions are premises accepted as true without verification at the outset, while limitations reflect uncontrolled factors that may weaken the study (Flick, 2023; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). This section clarifies these concepts and their application to the present case study.

Assumptions

Assumptions represent conditions presumed to be accurate for the purposes of the case study, though they remain unverified (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The first assumption I made was on the relevance of successful NPO leaders. I assumed that NPO leaders who have effectively motivated employees can provide transferable strategies for enhancing

work engagement, satisfaction, and retention. The second assumption I made was about credibility and honesty. I assumed that these leaders are both knowledgeable and willing to candidly share their experiences. The third assumption was on the suitability of the qualitative design. I presumed that a qualitative approach, particularly semistructured interviews, is appropriate for exploring the complex phenomenon of employee motivation. The fourth and final assumption was on access to organizational documents. I assumed that NPOs would grant access to relevant internal management documents and that such documents are valid representations of real-world practices. A mitigation strategy was necessary to be in place. While these assumptions provided a foundation for the case study, they carry inherent risks and should be treated cautiously.

Limitations

Limitations are external weaknesses beyond a researcher's control that may influence study outcomes (Flick, 2023). The four key limitations of this case study include self-reporting, resource constraints, the sampling technique, and single-researcher bias. First, relying solely on self-reported data introduces potential bias, including social desirability, confirmation bias, and reference bias (Anvari et al., 2023; McSweeney, 2021). Second, limited funding and time constrained both the sample size and the geographical diversity, possibly affecting the representativeness of the findings. Third, the choice of sampling technique can be a limitation. Using purposive sampling and a small cohort of NPO leaders constrains external transferability (M. Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Stratton, 2024). Finally, single-researcher bias is also a limitation. The researcher's role as the sole data collector and analyzer can introduce reflexivity and confirmatory

biases (see McSweeney, 2021; see Zahle, 2025), as these authors discuss such risks in qualitative research more generally. These four limitations are intrinsic to qualitative case-based research and should guide interpretation and future replication of results.

Business Project Ethics

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation. This role requires methodological rigor, ethical vigilance, and reflexivity to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, and richness of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's responsibilities encompass five key areas: (a) designing and planning the research project, (b) data collection and analysis, (c) ethical oversight, (d) reflexivity, and (e) interpretation and dissemination of findings. During the design phase, the researcher develops the study framework, selects sampling strategies, and ensures alignment between methodology and research questions (Flick, 2023). Digital tools increasingly support data collection and analysis across multiple modalities (Saraswati, 2025). Data collection typically involves semistructured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Researchers must actively listen, probe thoughtfully, and maintain neutrality to minimize interviewer bias (Chand, 2025; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers commonly employ open-ended questions to allow participants to respond in their own words (Fraser et al., 2018) and use structured or semistructured interview guides to ensure consistency across interviews (Bearman, 2019). Fraser et al. (2018) noted that participants should respond in their own words, while Bearman (2019) recommended using structured interview guides to

maintain consistency across interviews. Overall, the researcher's role in qualitative inquiry is central and dynamic, requiring careful integration of technical skill, ethical responsibility, and reflective judgment to produce meaningful and credible insights that faithfully represent participants' experiences.

Qualitative data analysis and interpretation are iterative, ethically grounded, and reflexive processes that shape the credibility and meaning of research findings. Data analysis begins with repeated reading of transcripts to identify emerging themes and patterns (Clark & Vealé, 2018; J. Yates & Leggett, 2016). Coding may be manual or supported by software such as NVivo (Clark & Vealé, 2018). Ethical oversight includes maintaining confidentiality, securing informed consent, and ensuring voluntary participation (Haines, 2017; Ngozwana, 2018). Reflexivity, an ongoing critical practice, requires awareness of personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual influences on the research process (McLeod, 2024; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Reflexive journaling enhances transparency and depth (Berger, 2015). The researcher's role extends beyond data collection to include interpretation and dissemination of findings. Interpretation involves reflective thinking to assess how biases influence findings (Flannery, 2016; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Presenting participant-driven themes rather than personal assumptions ensures transparency and credibility (Clark & Vealé, 2018). Once data have been collected, the researcher systematically engages with the data to identify patterns, uphold ethical standards, and critically reflect on personal influence throughout analysis and dissemination.

Relationships to Topic, Participants, and Context

Researcher positionality and prior experience can influence qualitative inquiry, requiring strategies to maintain transparency and minimize bias. Prior experience in the research domain provides valuable contextual insight but may introduce bias; reflexivity is essential to mitigate this risk (Khatun & Haque, 2024). Building rapport with participants fosters authentic responses while upholding ethical integrity (Berger, 2015; S. Lee, 2025). Positionality, shaped by cultural, socioeconomic, and academic background, affects the research process, and positionality statements are widely recognized for promoting transparency and credibility (Sibbald et al., 2025; Yip, 2024). Acknowledging positionality and practicing reflexivity ensures that personal perspectives do not distort data interpretation. These measures strengthen trustworthiness by clarifying the researcher's stance and maintaining ethical rigor throughout the study. Accordingly, I maintained reflexivity through journaling and built rapport ethically to minimize bias and enhance transparency.

Bias Mitigation

To ensure rigor and minimize bias in qualitative research, structured strategies were implemented throughout the case study. Researchers recommend framing research questions based on systematic reviews and citation analyses, applying transparent protocols, and using critical appraisal tools to maintain methodological integrity (Khatun & Haque, 2024; Smith & Noble, 2025). Additionally, defining target populations helps mitigate selection bias and enhance generalizability (Rojas Saunero et al., 2023). In qualitative contexts, bias can be reduced through structured data collection, reflexive

practices, and validation of emerging themes (Zahle, 2025). These strategies collectively strengthen the credibility of findings by reducing personal influence and ensuring that interpretations are grounded in evidence. Reflexivity and member checking further enhance trustworthiness by incorporating participant feedback and confirming accuracy. Accordingly, I minimized bias by framing research questions based on current literature, using structured data collection protocols, applying reflexive practices throughout analysis, and validating emerging themes through member checking to ensure transparency and rigor.

Ethical Considerations, Oversight, and Informed Consent

Ethical oversight and informed consent are essential components of qualitative research, ensuring participant protection and adherence to established research standards. The Belmont Report's principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice provide the foundation for ethical research practices (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Researchers are required to uphold high ethical standards by obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and securing informed consent that clearly explains the case study objectives, roles, risks, and benefits (Resnik, 2024; Stefaniak & Mazurkiewicz, 2017). Prior studies emphasized the importance of ethical clearance and informed consent to prevent harm and maintain participant autonomy (Haines, 2017; Mann et al., 2016; Ngozwana, 2018). Recent scholarship advances these principles by advocating for continuous consent and reflexivity throughout fieldwork (Klykken, 2022; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022), as well as accessible and interactive consent processes tailored to diverse populations (Holtza et al., 2025;

Voytecki & Hassler, 2024). These ethical frameworks collectively underscore the need for transparency, participant understanding, and ongoing engagement during research. By integrating continuous consent practices and ensuring clarity in communication, researchers can address evolving ethical dilemmas and foster trust, particularly when working with vulnerable groups (see United States Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2003). In alignment with these principles, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Walden University and secured written informed consent from all participants. Consent materials were designed to be clear and accessible, and ongoing consent practices were employed throughout data collection to uphold ethical standards and protect participant welfare.

Role of IRB in Ensuring Ethical Conduct

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) ensure that the researcher is adequately qualified and that participant protection, including confidentiality and informed consent, is sufficiently addressed (C. A. Anderson et al., 2014). Contemporary evidence suggested that IRBs contribute significantly to safeguarding human research subjects, although their procedures can sometimes introduce delays and inconsistencies (Stryjewski et al., 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). C. A. Anderson et al. (2014) classified the IRB as an institutional overseer of ethical conduct. After the IRB ensured that I, as the researcher, had the qualifications to conduct the case study and had established sufficient strategies to ethically protect the participant, preserve their confidentiality, and utilize signed informed consent forms, I received IRB approval number 08-11-20-0382018 before proceeding with this research project.

Informed Consent Process

Participants received a clear explanation of the case study's purpose, procedures, and ethical principles in language they understood. It was essential to explain the case study's goals, ethical foundations, and participants' rights to participate through informed consent, clearly and in language they understood, especially their right to withdraw at any time (see Ngozwana, 2018). The consent process emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Klykken (2022) advanced the notion of continuous consent, a dynamic approach in which consent is frequently revisited and reconfirmed across research phases, thereby maintaining awareness and autonomy. Continuous consent was maintained throughout the research project to reinforce autonomy. The interview protocol is included in the appendix and listed in the Table of Contents.

Procedures for Participant Withdrawal

Ethical research practice requires clearly defined and rigorously implemented participant withdrawal procedures to protect autonomy and sustain trust throughout the research process. Participant withdrawal is a fundamental ethical right in research, grounded in the principles of autonomy and respect for persons articulated in the Belmont Report (USDHHS, 2003). Recent literature has underscored that withdrawal procedures must be transparent, standardized, and supportive to maintain participant trust and uphold research integrity. Dahal (2024) highlighted that researchers often overlook intangible forms of data, such as emotions and personal impressions, when participants withdraw, underscoring the need for ethically sensitive, context-appropriate approaches. Similarly,

Capell et al. (2021) argued that clearly outlining withdrawal rights, including the management of passive follow-up data, ensures an appropriate balance between participant autonomy and beneficence. Foláyan and Haire (2023) further stressed that trust in research relationships depends on accountability and clarity, suggesting that withdrawal protocols should be explicitly embedded within governance structures to maintain ethical standards. Within this ethical framework, withdrawal is not merely a procedural formality but a critical component of respectful and accountable researcher–participant relationships.

Building on these perspectives, the PeRSEVERE project by Cragg et al. (2025) has advanced the field by proposing standardized frameworks for managing consent withdrawal and other changes in participant participation in clinical trials, reinforcing the importance of consistency, documentation, and participant-centered processes. In line with these principles, participants in this study were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Withdrawal procedures were clearly explained during the consent process, including how previously collected data would be handled, whether deleted or retained in anonymized form. These measures ensured transparency, protected participants from coercion or undue influence, and aligned the case study with emerging international best practices for ethical withdrawal management.

Incentives

No financial or material incentives were offered. Participation was entirely voluntary to avoid ethical concerns related to inducement (Abdelazeem et al., 2022; Różyńska, 2022). Assuming that providing individuals with financial incentives to

become research participants may have unintended counterproductive outcomes, to avoid any ethical complications, in this case study, I did not provide participants with financial or material incentives. The participants voluntarily participated in the research without the expectation of any incentive.

Protection of Confidentiality

While collecting data, researchers should maintain confidentiality and make participants less identifiable in all reporting. J. Kim and Kang (2023) emphasized that confidentiality and anonymity promote authentic responses, reinforce trust, and preserve the integrity of research. While quoting participants' actual words, researchers should ensure that combinations of incidental details (occupation, location, age, gender, and ethnicity) do not inadvertently lead to participants' identification (Haines, 2017). To ensure confidentiality, I assigned and referred to each participant by a unique identifier code, P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, maintained a secure, encrypted file for each participant, and referred to the organization as organization X to enhance confidentiality. I will store the data from the participants in a safe deposit box for 5 years, after which I will destroy all the collected data related to the research.

Data Storage

Secure storage of qualitative research data for at least five years is widely supported by ethical and regulatory frameworks. Karcher et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of implementing encryption and institutional protocols early in the research lifecycle to protect sensitive data. Researchers recommend storing data in a secure, access-controlled location for 5 years, in compliance with IRB and institutional

guidelines, after which data can be permanently destroyed (Karcher et al., 2023; Mtisi, 2022). This practice not only ensures compliance with ethical standards but also reinforces participant trust and the integrity of the research process.

Interview questions

To answer the project research question: What leadership strategies do NPO leaders use to motivate employees? The seven interview questions used to explore leadership strategies for motivating employees are listed in Appendix A.

Evidence-Based Integrative Review

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore the leadership strategies that some NPO leaders use to motivate employees. I conducted a single-case study focusing on one NPO in the Northern region of Tigray, in Ethiopia. The intent of my literature review was to provide an overview, critical analysis, and synthesis of relevant and current studies addressing (a) motivational theories, (b) types of motivation, (c) motivation factors, and (d) leadership strategies affecting employee motivation. To ensure scholarship thoroughness and complexity in the literature review, I used various sources, mainly peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, seminal scholarly books, and other sources. I tried to update my old sources with more current sources. I also ensured sufficient sources had a publication date of 5 years or less from my anticipated completion date of May 2026. I accessed the information via the Walden University Library using databases such as ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Collection, Business Source Complete, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, and Google Scholar. To help me update the literature review with newer sources following a long period of absence, I used artificial

intelligence (AI) Copilot to aid and fast-track the process; while ensuring I retained the originality of my research project. To search for relevant peer-reviewed articles, I used the following search terms: *motivation, motivation theories, contemporary theories of motivation, motivation strategies, employee motivation and NPOs, and leadership and motivation.*

The sources used in this qualitative single-case study totaled 296 references, reflecting extensive and rigorous scholarly engagement. These sources comprised 268 peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, two doctoral dissertations, two government reports, 2 articles accessed through government databases, 2 conference proceedings, 14 books and book chapters, and six non-governmental and industry reports. Of the total sources, 90.5% were peer-reviewed journal articles, underscoring the study's academic rigor. Additionally, 150 sources (50.7%) were published between 2021 and 2025, ensuring that more than half of the literature was current within 5 years of the anticipated 2026 graduation date. This comprehensive and diverse body of literature demonstrates the depth and breadth of scholarly engagement that underpins the study's theoretical, methodological, and empirical foundations. Additionally, 78 sources (26%) were unique to the literature review, demonstrating both breadth and depth of scholarly engagement. The literature review was organized into six major themes: (a) motivational theories, (b) alternative theories, (c) theory applied to the business topic, (d) employee motivation, (e) employee motivation in nonprofit organizations, and (f) the link between employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational outcomes. The first section presents the conceptual framework, offering an overview of major motivational theories, distinctions

between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, categorization of motivation theories, and development of the research framework. This section culminates in establishing self-determination theory (SDT) as the primary conceptual foundation and integrating it with Vroom's expectancy theory. The second section synthesizes business problem scholarship evidence, while the third and final section provides an analysis of business topic scholarship, highlighting leadership strategies and organizational practices relevant to motivating employees in nonprofit organizations.

Conceptual Framework

In my case study, I used the composite conceptual framework of the (a) self-determination theory that recognizes that leaders motivate employees through the satisfaction of the three innate, employee psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and (b) Vroom's expectancy theory that offers a framework for understanding the cognitive processes behind an individual's decision to put forth effort, and which explained the motivational mechanisms by way of changes in the process of satisfying human needs and how human behavior is encouraged, directed and maintained with respect to desired goals. A researcher studying motivation needs to delve deeper into the literature to understand how the various motivational theories align with the proposed research project.

Any human being would find difficulties performing a task without any source or form of motivation. Motivation is a term derived from the Latin *movere*, meaning "to move," and is sometimes translated as *to stimulate* (Ndukw & Ofondu, 2018).

Researchers define motivation as a psychological state that influences the arousal,

direction, and persistence of behaviors aimed at satisfying needs (Cook & Artino, 2016; Khusainova et al., 2018). This definition highlights that motivation is not merely an internal static feeling but a dynamic internal process that propels and shapes behavior. Cook and Artino (2016) further identified five major theoretical frameworks that dominate employee motivation research: expectancy-value theory, attribution theory, social-cognitive theory, goal-orientation theory, and self-determination theory (SDT). These theories explain how individuals' expectations, goals, and sense of autonomy influence their engagement and performance. Current reviews (e.g., Bandhu et al., 2024) showed these leading motivation theories, such as expectancies (expectancy-value), causal attributions (attribution theory), perceived competence (social-cognitive), goal focus (goal-orientation), and psychological need satisfaction (self-determination theory), remain essential for understanding how people engage and perform in professional settings. Understanding these motivational theories is critical for organizations seeking to enhance employee productivity and satisfaction, as they provide actionable insights into what drives human behavior in the workplace.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is widely regarded as a leading conceptual framework for analyzing employee motivation due to its universality and multi-level applicability. Proponents of SDT argue that motivation can be examined at global, situational, and state levels, making the theory particularly well-suited for studying motivation in complex organizational contexts (Deci et al., 2017; DeRobertis & Bland, 2018; Manganelli et al., 2018). A substantial body of research demonstrates that SDT provides one of the strongest evidence bases for understanding and enhancing work

motivation, with consistent findings that supporting employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness improves well-being, engagement, and performance across diverse sectors (Olafsen & Deci, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Moving beyond correlational research, organizational intervention studies have shown that training leaders to adopt autonomy-supportive behaviors leads to measurable changes in leadership practices, and, over time, to improvements in subordinate motivation and work-related outcomes (Slemp et al., 2021). More recently, SDT has been applied to emerging future-of-work contexts, including remote and hybrid work arrangements, virtual teamwork, and algorithmic management, in which need-supportive leadership and job design are critical for sustaining high-quality motivation (Gagné et al., 2022). Despite its strengths, some scholars recommend integrating SDT with additional motivational models, particularly as organizations expand globally and encounter diverse cultural and institutional contexts (Cook & Artino, 2016; Rahman & Nurullah, 2014). Accordingly, while SDT offers a robust and extensively validated foundation for understanding employee motivation, combining it with complementary motivational frameworks may provide a more comprehensive and culturally responsive basis for designing effective organizational policies and practices in an increasingly globalized workforce.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation in Resource-Constrained Nonprofits

The psychological motivational state may come in different, distinctive types. Researchers divided the motivation into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, in which intrinsic motivation arises from enjoyment of an activity in the absence of an apparent reinforcement, and extrinsic motivation is concerned with an activity performed

to obtain a separable outcome apart from the activity (Khusainova et al., 2018). Humans have intrinsic motivational tendencies, which need supportive conditions to be maintained (Rayburn et al., 2018). In NPOs, financial incentives alone rarely sustain motivation. Post-pandemic compensation analyses reveal rising executive pay alongside persistent inequities (e.g., gender gaps at the largest organizations) and continuing recruitment challenges as factors that influence morale and retention (Feng & Greenlee, 2024). SDT-aligned design (choice, rationale, goal clarity, competence feedback) can protect intrinsic motivation even when extrinsic resources are constrained, helping leaders balance mission fit with fair rewards (Gagné et al., 2022). Leaders who understand the various sources and forms of motivation strive to create supportive conditions and adapt relevant types of motivation for different employees at various times

Motivation Theories and Developing the Research Framework

Motivation theories are commonly grouped into three categories: content theories, process theories, and contemporary theories. Researchers have classified motivation theories based on their focus and explanatory mechanisms into these three categories (Badubi, 2017; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2017). Content theories, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, Alderfer's ERG theory, and McClelland's needs theory, primarily address the "what" of motivation (Badubi, 2017; Maslow, 1943). As observed by Sahito and Vaisanen (2017), these content theories assumed all employees in an organization share similar set of needs, which organizations and leaders can predict and satisfy to enhance employee motivation. However, this assumption overlooks individual differences in context, background, and aspirations.

Employees from different contexts, with diverse backgrounds and aspirations are unlikely to have the same set of needs. Recent research grounded in self-determination theory (SDT) challenges this notion, showing that supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness yields superior engagement and performance compared to more generic one-size-fits-all approaches (Laguerre & Barnes-Farrell, 2024; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Understanding these distinctions helps organizations move beyond one-size-fits-all strategies toward more personalized, need-supportive practices.

Conversely to the content theories, process theories explain how motivation operates through mechanisms that direct and sustain behavior toward goals. Classic process theories, including Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), Adams's equity theory (Adams, 1963), Locke's goal-setting theory (Locke, 1968), Skinner's reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1963), and the Porter–Lawler model, explain motivational mechanisms through changes in the processes of satisfying human needs and through the ways human behavior is encouraged, directed, and maintained toward desired goals (Badubi, 2017; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2017). Recent meta-analytic evidence continues to affirm the relevance of process mechanisms. For example, process-focused goals produce the largest performance gains, and combining goal setting with timely feedback enhances both motivation and outcomes (Williamson et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of integrating feedback and goal clarity into organizational practices to optimize employee performance.

Contemporary motivation theories remain highly relevant in dynamic work environments. Contemporary theories of motivation include equity, control and agency theory, goal-setting, reinforcement, job design, and SDT (Badubi, 2017). Equity theory continues to influence retention strategies. Recent studies showed that perceived fairness in workload, recognition, and pay strongly influences retention, while pay-for-performance improves task performance outcomes through distributive and procedural justice perceptions (Y. Chen et al., 2023; Shinde, 2025).

Autonomy-supportive leadership and HR practices have evolved within control and agency perspectives, with research showing that they satisfy psychological needs and foster engagement, moderated by cultural and demographic factors (Jiang & Wei, 2024; Laguerre & Barnes-Farrell, 2024). Similarly, job design theory adapts to remote and hybrid contexts, emphasizing autonomy and technology support, with cross-cultural studies revealing variations in impactful job characteristics (Olivo et al., 2025; Pfajfar Cotič et al., 2025). Collectively, these insights highlight the enduring and adaptive nature of motivation theories in guiding organizational strategies.

A researcher studying employee motivations should understand fully the different motivation theories and how and when to apply them. Self-determination theory (SDT) is widely regarded as a universal and multi-level framework for understanding human motivation, applicable across cultures and measurable at global, situational, and state levels (Deci et al., 2017; Manganelli et al., 2018). SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness predict engagement and well-being across diverse contexts (Laguerre & Barnes-Farrell, 2024; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Experimental evidence

showed that need-supportive managerial training improves vitality and self-efficacy while reducing need-thwarting behaviors (Wang & Briand, 2025). Cross-cultural studies affirm SDT's universality, demonstrating that satisfaction mediates thriving at work even in high power-distance cultures (Jiang & Wei, 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore SDT's robustness as an analytical framework for studying employee motivation in dynamic and diverse work environments and confirm SDT's adaptability to emerging work contexts such as remote work and algorithmic management. SDT's robustness makes it an essential analytical framework for studying employee motivation in dynamic and diverse organizational environments.

Academic Summary of Self-Determination Theory and Its Integration with Expectancy Theory

People know themselves best, and therefore, each individual knows best what stimulates them to act. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how workplace environments influence the quality of employee motivation, performance, and well-being. At its core, SDT asserts that optimal motivation emerges when three basic psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping these conditions through the climate they create and the behaviors they model. When leaders support these needs, employees experience higher-quality motivation, stronger performance, and improved well-being, whereas need frustration often leads to disengagement, stress, and turnover (Y. Liu et al., 2020). Interventions that train leaders to adopt need-supportive behaviors, such as offering

meaningful choice and providing informational feedback, have consistently demonstrated positive effects on employee outcomes (Slemp et al., 2021). This foundation sets the stage for examining each psychological need in detail.

Need for Competence. Competence, the sense of feeling effective and capable in one's context, is central to sustaining motivation and high-quality performance. Leaders can strengthen competence by inviting employees to participate in decision-making, aligning tasks with existing skills while scaffolding new ones, and providing timely, informational feedback that promotes learning and progress (Gagné et al., 2022; Slemp et al., 2021). These practices not only enhance skill development but also foster creativity and engagement through need satisfaction (Ye et al., 2025). Furthermore, tailoring training and development to employees' experience levels amplifies autonomous motivation and elevates performance across diverse roles (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Competence thus forms a critical link to autonomy, as employees who feel capable often seek greater decision-making freedom.

Need for Autonomy. Autonomy refers to the capacity and freedom to make informed, uncoerced decisions, and choices, influenced by individual factors and environmental conditions, which drives intrinsic motivation and well-being. Self-determination theory conceptualizes motivation along a continuum from autonomous (acting out of genuine interest or personal value) to controlled (acting due to external pressures, obligation, or to gain rewards) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Leaders who embed choice into job design empower employees, fostering autonomy and engagement (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Autonomy-supportive environments

reduce bureaucratic constraints and rigid rules that undermine motivation, while calibrated autonomy provision ensures that employees receive appropriate levels of guidance based on their competence (Slemp et al., 2021). By cultivating autonomy, leaders create conditions for strategic growth and sustained well-being, which naturally complement the need for relatedness.

Need for Relatedness. Relatedness refers to the sense of connection and belonging, which further strengthens motivation by fostering trust and collaboration. Leaders who demonstrate authenticity, humility, care, and create environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enhance relational bonds and foster deeper internalization of organizational goals and values compared to contexts that thwart these needs (Gagné et al., 2022; X. Liu, 2018; Rayburn et al., 2018). Servant leadership, characterized by empathy and follower support, has been shown to fulfill relatedness needs and promote thriving at work, particularly in low power-distance contexts (Jiang & Wei, 2024). During crises, servant leadership's emphasis on well-being and dignity further motivates adaptive behaviors (Schlunegger et al., 2024). By modeling caring and trustworthy behaviors, leaders create positive climates that reinforce relational connectedness, making relatedness a consistent source of motivation in the workplace (Hein & Urban, 2025). Therefore, by prioritizing relatedness through authentic and servant leadership behaviors, leaders can cultivate a resilient and motivated workforce that aligns with long-term goals and thrives even in challenging contexts.

Integration with Vroom's Expectancy Theory. While SDT emphasizes the quality of motivational energy, Vroom's expectancy theory (VIE) addresses the cognitive

calculus behind effort. VIE posits that motivation depends on valence (the attractiveness of rewards), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to rewards), and expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance) (Cook & Artino, 2016; Vroom, 1964).

Integrating SDT with VIE offers a richer understanding of workplace motivation.

Competence strengthens expectancy by enhancing confidence in effort–performance links; autonomy and relatedness increase valence by making outcomes personally meaningful and socially connected; and authentic leadership behaviors that satisfy relatedness improve trust in performance–reward contingencies, reinforcing instrumentality (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Slemp et al., 2024). This synergy enables leaders to design interventions that elevate both the quality of motivation and the certainty of effort–reward relationships, guiding holistic job designs and incentive systems that support intrinsic and extrinsic motivation across sectors (Fang, 2023; Kumar et al., 2025). Thus, VIE supports SDT by operationalizing how need satisfaction translates into actionable effort through expectancy-based mechanisms, enabling leaders to design interventions that simultaneously elevate motivation quality and decision certainty.

Business Problem Scholarship Evidence

Employee motivation is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational success, particularly in nonprofit organizations in which mission-driven work intersects with resource constraints. Unlike for-profit entities, nonprofits often rely on intrinsic motivators such as mission alignment and social impact rather than financial incentives (Ye et al., 2025). Leadership’s ability to foster motivation through strategies

that satisfy employees' psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, is essential for sustaining engagement and performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). However, global evidence demonstrates that nonprofit leaders face persistent barriers, including staffing shortages, burnout, and financial instability, which significantly impede their ability to support these needs and sustain intrinsic motivation (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2024a; Forvis Mazars, 2025). The nonprofit sector is substantial and growing. According to the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, nonprofits, employ millions globally, and account for a significant share of social service delivery. Yet, this sector faces unique challenges: limited funding, high turnover, and increasing demand for post-pandemic services. These structural issues amplify the importance of effective leadership strategies to maintain workforce motivation and organizational sustainability.

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a robust framework for understanding work motivation. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), individuals have three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, that are essential for well-being and optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When these needs are satisfied, employees experience intrinsic motivation, leading to higher engagement, job satisfaction, and performance (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Olafsen & Marescaux, 2025). Conversely, unmet needs result in disengagement, burnout, and turnover (Paquette et al., 2025). Leaders play a pivotal role in creating environments that fulfill these needs. For example, autonomy can be supported through participative decision-making, competence through professional development opportunities, and relatedness through fostering

collaborative cultures. These strategies are particularly critical in nonprofits, in which financial incentives are limited and mission-driven work is the primary motivator (Ye et al., 2025). Empirical studies reinforce the importance of leadership in motivating nonprofit employees. Forner et al. (2021) and Karauri and Kyongo (2024) found that perceived leader support significantly influences employee engagement and organizational commitment. Ye et al. (2025) emphasized recognition, mission alignment, and empathy as central to nonprofit motivation. G. G. Anderson and Gilin (2024) identified four motivational profiles among nonprofit workers, with autonomously motivated employees demonstrating higher performance and lower turnover intentions. Understanding employee motivation is essential for addressing performance, retention, and well-being in nonprofit organizations.

Recent nonprofit workforce analyses indicate that recruitment challenges remain a persistent concern across the sector. Career Blazers' 2023–2024 Nonprofit Compensation Practices and Benchmarking Report found that 56% of nonprofits reported greater difficulty recruiting and hiring qualified staff in 2023, underscoring ongoing talent shortages and increasing competitive pressures within the nonprofit labor market (Career Blazers Nonprofit Search, 2024a). Similarly, the 2024 PNP Staffing Nonprofit Salaries and Staffing Trends Report reported that 59% of organizations experienced significantly greater difficulty filling open positions, primarily due to limited qualified applicant pools, heightened competition for talent, and salary constraints (PNP Staffing Group, 2024). Expanding beyond staffing concerns, broader sector assessments emphasize urgent challenges related to workforce motivation and organizational capacity. According to the

2025 Forvis Mazars State of the Nonprofit Sector Report, 65% of nonprofits are hampered by staffing shortages, 77% have experienced increased demand for programs and services, and more than three-quarters face difficulty recruiting senior leaders, signaling persistent systemic pressures across the sector (Forvis Mazars, 2025). Burnout further intensifies these pressures: the Center for Effective Philanthropy's State of Nonprofits 2024 report indicates that 95% of nonprofit leaders express concern about staff burnout, and approximately 50% report moderate to severe difficulty filling vacancies, highlighting widespread organizational strain (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2024a, 2024b). Financial instability remains a compounding factor, with 47% of nonprofits lacking sufficient funds to deliver programs and services, according to additional findings from Forvis Mazars (2025). In response to these challenges, nonprofits are increasingly investing in staff development: the 2025 Career Blazers Nonprofit Compensation Practices and Benchmarking Report shows that 64% of organizations now offer training and career development opportunities, and that recruitment difficulty decreased from 56% in 2023 to 47% in 2024, illustrating sector-wide efforts to improve retention and strengthen workforce capability (Career Blazers Nonprofit Search, 2024b). Despite the motivational insights offered by SDT, nonprofit organizations continue to face substantial workforce challenges that threaten organizational capacity and sustainability.

The evidence reveals a clear disconnect between theoretical motivation frameworks and operational realities. SDT validates the need to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and empirical research confirms that these factors drive

engagement and performance. However, actual workplace conditions, staffing shortages, burnout, and poor compensation systematically undercut leaders' ability to meet these needs (G. G. Anderson & Gilin, 2024). Leadership pipeline gaps and burnout further limit leaders' capacity to create supportive environments (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2024a). Financial instability restricts nonprofits' ability to invest in staff development and well-being (Forvis Mazars, 2025). Even with training programs, financial stress and inadequate pay severely limit intrinsic motivation. The confluence of theoretical validation, empirical scholarly evidence, and industry data confirms that motivating staff within global nonprofit contexts remains critically problematic. Structural constraints, including funding shortages, burnout, and leadership challenges, prevent leaders from creating environments that satisfy employees' fundamental psychological needs. Without intervention, this undermines nonprofit effectiveness, workforce stability, and mission fulfillment.

Business Topic Scholarship

Leaders of nonprofit organizations faced with a persistent challenge of sustaining employee motivation lack strategies to motivate employees. Contemporary motivational science, especially SDT, integrated with Vroom's expectancy theory, offers a robust pathway by supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. VIE complements SDT by explaining *why employees exert effort*: they believe effort leads to performance (expectancy), performance leads to valued outcomes (instrumentality), and those outcomes matter to them (valence). This sets up the rationale for blending intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Recent evidence has confirmed strong links between need support

and well-being, and positive associations with performance, with controlled motivation tied to burnout (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Slemp et al., 2024). This integrative review synthesizes scholar–practitioner evidence to address a persistent business problem: how leaders on nonprofit organizations can sustain employee motivation, engagement, and innovative performance amid resource constraints and hybrid/virtual work.

The strongest causal pathway identified derives from self-determination theory (SDT): interpersonal support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness elevates need satisfaction and autonomous motivation, which in turn predicts engagement and performance while reducing burnout risk (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Slemp et al., 2024). Ethical and inclusive leadership reinforce this pathway by building trust and psychological safety, two conditions that mediate innovative performance and buffer the effects of constraints on burnout and retention (Bahadurzada et al., 2024; Li & Tang, 2022). In hybrid settings, positive and transformational leadership remain effective, but their impact declines under high ICT demands, making digital enablement a necessary complement to relational leadership (Caniëls, 2023; Tautz et al., 2024). A mission-aligned Total Rewards architecture that uses informational (non-controlling) recognition and transparent pay practices can coexist with intrinsic motivation and strengthen equity, which is crucial in nonprofits and field operations (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Slemp et al., 2024). The recommended operating model integrates SDT-aligned leadership, inclusive routines, digital facilitation, and transparent rewards, with continuous measurement of need satisfaction, psychological safety, engagement, burnout, innovation, and retention. Phased implementation over time can institutionalize these

capabilities and create a self-correcting system that sustains motivation and innovation over time.

Anchoring Leadership Motivation Strategies in Self-determination Theory

Leaders can adapt several strategies to motivating employees through learning (competence), innovation (autonomy), and building trust (relatedness). A large-scale meta-analysis indicated that autonomy, competence, and relatedness support strongly predict need satisfaction and well-being, with small-to-moderate positive links to performance across cultures (Slemp et al., 2024). A complementary meta-analytic SEM shows perceived autonomy support drives adaptive outcomes via need satisfaction and autonomous motivation, while controlled motivation relates to burnout (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Leaders can motivate employees by creating environments that promote learning and innovation. When leaders actively promote inclusive leadership, involving employees in decision-making and providing autonomy, they foster intrinsic motivation and encourage creative behaviors (Zafar et al., 2024). Similarly, democratic leadership cultivates psychological safety, and creative potential significantly boosts innovation, particularly in hierarchical or collectivist cultures (Behravesch et al., 2021; Imran et al., 2025).

Core practices to operationalize the SDT include autonomy-supportive job design, competence-building development, and relatedness-rich interactions. Because need support is interpersonal, manager behaviors are pivotal; leaders who provide choice and informational feedback consistently yield higher engagement and discretionary effort (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Slemp et al., 2024). Beyond structural and motivational

strategies grounded in SDT, cultivating high-quality relationships and trust further amplifies these effects by creating a supportive climate in which employees feel valued and empowered to grow. While SDT emphasizes psychological need satisfaction, VIE clarifies the cognitive calculus behind effort. Leaders must ensure employees perceive a clear link between effort and competence development (expectancy), and that mastery translates into recognition or advancement (instrumentality). When growth opportunities align with personal values such as contributing to a mission, valence strengthens, sustaining motivation beyond intrinsic drivers.

Ethical and Inclusive Leadership to Build Trust, Safety, and Innovation

Building quality relationships and valuing employee contributions also motivates employees to take on new challenges and learn new skills. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and invest in trust empower employees to embrace growth opportunities (Bande et al., 2016; Rai & Prakash, 2016). Ethical leadership plays a critical role in fostering an environment of trust, safety, and innovation. A recent empirical study across various industries in Jordan found that ethical leadership directly enhanced employees' innovative work behaviors, with psychological empowerment and job crafting acting as significant mediators (Abuzaid et al., 2024). Additionally, a 2025 study in China demonstrated that ethical leadership positively influences radical innovation through leader identification, with its effects amplified by employees' promotion focus (Zhu et al., 2025). These findings support the notion that when leaders lead with integrity, transparency, and a genuine concern for their teams, employees feel psychologically secure and empowered to take initiative and explore creative solutions. Consequently,

ethical leadership not only builds trust but also unlocks discretionary effort and drives meaningful innovation in organizations.

Trust in leader mediates ethical leadership's impact on engagement, highlighting transparent, fair, values-consistent behavior (T. Islam et al., 2023). Servant leadership reinforces this dynamic by prioritizing follower development and creating a caring culture that supports personal and professional growth (Jiang & Wei, 2024). Employees perceive motivational behaviors as empowering and trust-building, which strengthens their engagement and willingness to innovate (Tanno & Banner, 2018). Ethical leaders who act with honesty, integrity, and fairness, and maintain transparent interactions, create environments that promote learning, encourage innovation, and build trust with and among employees, which enables them to motivate employees, improve engagement, and performance.

Inclusive leadership strengthens these outcomes by promoting psychological safety and psychological empowerment among employees. Multilevel evidence showed inclusive leadership increases innovative performance via psychological safety at individual and team levels (Li & Tang, 2022) and boosts autonomous motivation and innovative work behavior, with trust amplifying effects indirectly through increased work engagement and stronger leader–member exchanges (Umrani et al., 2024; Zafar et al., 2024). Moreover, bibliometric research in 2025 emphasized that leadership that fosters inclusion plays a crucial role in establishing a psychologically safe environment, which in turn fuels organizational innovation (S. Putra et al., 2025). When leaders create inclusive spaces, valuing diverse perspectives, facilitating open communication, and ensuring fair

participation, teams experience higher psychological safety and autonomy. This environment enables employees to confidently contribute novel ideas and collaborate effectively. Leaders who demonstrate genuine concern for employee growth, apply fair evaluations, and practice inclusive leadership, not only build trust, effort, sustainable motivation, and engagement, but also establish the psychological conditions essential for innovation. Ethical and inclusive leadership enhances expectancy by reducing ambiguity about performance standards and fairness. Transparent communication about how innovative behaviors lead to recognition or career progression reinforces instrumentality. When employees value these outcomes, such as trust, belonging, and professional growth, valence amplifies their willingness to engage in discretionary effort.

Leadership in Hybrid, and Virtual Settings

Effective leadership in virtual and hybrid environments requires more than traditional direction and relational support. Recent integrative and systematic reviews emphasize that leaders must also facilitate technology use to meet employees' psychological needs (Höddinghaus et al., 2024; Oranga & Matere, 2023).

Complementary research from remote work showed that positive leadership behaviors (praise, encouragement, personal thanks) particularly boost vigor when employees work from home (Caniëls, 2023). Transformational leadership supports well-being and engagement remotely, but ICT demands that inhibit communication, dampen effectiveness, underscoring the need to reduce digital friction and improve digital communication skills (Boccoli et al., 2024; Tautz et al., 2024). Under lockdown stress, transformational leadership improved performance through clearer collaboration channels

and shared vision (S. Ahmad et al., 2024). These findings suggest that leadership in virtual contexts must combine relational support with proactive management of technological challenges to sustain engagement and performance. Organizations should train leaders to integrate autonomy-supportive practices with digital facilitation strategies to optimize virtual team functioning. In virtual contexts, expectancy can erode due to unclear performance metrics. Leaders should clarify digital performance expectations and provide timely feedback to maintain expectancy. Instrumentality is reinforced when remote contributions are visibly linked to tangible outcomes (e.g., recognition, project ownership). Valence rises when these outcomes resonate with employees' desire for flexibility and meaningful impact.

Psychological Safety as a Buffer Against Resource Constraints and Burnout

Psychological safety can serve as a crucial buffer in resource constrained settings, mitigating the detrimental effects of resource constraints by reducing burnout and turnover intent among staff. Longitudinal data from more than 27,000 U.S. healthcare workers indicated that baseline psychological safety significantly attenuates the impact of staffing and tool shortages on burnout and turnover intentions over time (Bahadurzada et al., 2024). Complementing this, a 2024 cross-sectional study of 621 California nurse practitioners found that stronger psychological safety within work environments consistently reduced emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, even when work conditions were suboptimal, with mediation effects ranging from 29% to 37% (de Lisser et al., 2024). Together, these studies suggest that psychological safety operates as a “social resource” that bolsters resilience, enabling employees to better cope with chronic

stressors such as inadequate staffing or supplies. Bahadurzada et al. (2024) provided causal evidence over time, showing that individuals entering a psychologically safe environment maintain lower burnout and remain more committed, even as external pressures intensify. The nurse practitioner study supports this by revealing that psychological safety not only correlates with better well-being cross-sectionally but also mediates the link between environmental deficiencies and burnout symptoms. That convergence strengthens the argument that fostering a psychologically safe climate helps sustain both individual and organizational well-being. Therefore, investing in psychological safety is a strategic imperative, not a luxury, particularly when organizations face limited resources.

By embedding open communication, mutual respect, and non-punitive problem-solving into everyday practices, organizations can sustain staff resilience and retention even under significant operational constraints. By reducing perceived interpersonal risk and fear of punishment, psychological safety indirectly supports expectancy by enabling employees to believe that effort will not be penalized, thus increasing confidence in effort–performance linkage (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). When safe environments ensure fair evaluation and reward systems, instrumentality strengthens. Valence is heightened when outcomes include well-being and career security, highly valued in resource-constrained settings.

Vision and Leadership Communication

Effective leadership communication, which combines a clear, inspiring vision with inclusive practices, reinforces intrinsic motivation, psychological safety, and trust,

thereby enhancing engagement, innovation, and performance in resource-constrained environments. Decades of research show that when leaders articulate a compelling vision and involve employees in goal-setting, they foster trust, commitment, engagement, and improved performance (Berson et al., 2015; Bronkhorst et al., 2015; Horn et al., 2015). More recent studies further emphasize the role of inclusive leadership and psychological safety in driving innovation. A large-scale 2023–2024 study of 235 IT professionals in Pakistan revealed that inclusive leadership significantly boosts innovative work behavior through the autonomous motivation it fosters, especially in environments characterized by strong horizontal and vertical trust (Zafar et al., 2024). Similarly, research in Ugandan public universities found that psychologically safe climates, cultivated by socially responsible leaders, fully mediate the relationship between leadership style and innovative behavior (Kyambade et al., 2024). These findings illuminate the mechanisms by which leadership communication operates by offering not only information but also meaning, belonging, and autonomy, leaders attend directly to the basic psychological needs articulated in self-determination theory (SDT).

A clear, inspiring vision provides purpose (competence and relatedness), while inclusive behaviors; listening, involving, respecting ideas, underscore respect for autonomy and ensure psychological safety. Empowered employees, in turn, internalize organizational goals, feel trusted, and are more inclined to take initiative, experiment, and innovate, even when operational resources are scarce. Evidence across contexts confirmed that leadership communication grounded in vision, inclusion, and safety underpins both intrinsic motivation and creative performance (Li & Tang, 2022). Thus,

leadership communication must go beyond informing employees about the *what* and *how*. It must also affirm *why* through vision, *who* through inclusion, and *where* through psychological safety. Combining these elements enables leaders to sustain engagement and innovation, proving especially critical when material resources are limited. By integrating vision-driven communication with inclusive leadership practices, organizations can transform resource constraints into opportunities for engagement and innovation, ensuring that employees remain motivated, resilient, and aligned with a shared purpose. Vision-driven communication clarifies performance pathways (expectancy) and connects contributions to organizational success (instrumentality). When the vision aligns with employees' personal values, such as social impact, valence becomes a powerful motivator, complementing SDT's autonomy and relatedness drivers.

Compensation, Staffing, Mission Fit, and Total Rewards in NPOs

Nonprofit organizational leaders can strengthen retention, equity, and engagement by designing mission-aligned total rewards systems grounded in self-determination theory (SDT). Mission-aligned total rewards, designed around SDT, help nonprofits address retention and equity while sustaining engagement (G. G. Anderson & Gilin, 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Meta-analytic evidence showed interpersonal support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness robustly predict need satisfaction and well-being, and are positively, albeit modestly, associated with performance (Slemp et al., 2024). SDT further clarifies that informational rewards can support autonomy and competence, whereas controlling rewards undermines intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Meta-analytic findings confirm that these psychological needs are critical for sustaining

motivation and organizational effectiveness (Slemp et al., 2024). By integrating SDT principles into total rewards such as transparent pay practices, growth pathways, recognition, and mission-centric communication, nonprofits can signal fairness while strengthening intrinsic drivers that stabilize staffing and bolster innovation capacity (G. G. Anderson & Gilin, 2024; Slemp et al., 2024). Informational rewards and development opportunities reinforce autonomy and competence, creating a coherent architecture that promotes engagement and long-term commitment. Nonprofits should codify SDT-aligned rewards and development practices, and monitor outcomes (e.g., need satisfaction, retention, innovation) to refine investments under financial constraints (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Slemp et al., 2024). To maximize impact, nonprofits should codify SDT-aligned rewards and development practices, and continuously monitor outcomes like need satisfaction, retention, and innovation to refine investments while sustaining mission integrity and workforce resilience. VIE operationalizes total rewards by ensuring employees perceive transparent links between performance and rewards (instrumentality) and that these rewards are meaningful (valence). Informational recognition and growth pathways satisfy SDT needs while reinforcing expectancy through clear performance criteria.

Integrated Approach

Combining SDT principles with expectancy theory creates a holistic framework for motivation. Operationalizing SDT principles through autonomy-supportive leadership, participatory decision-making, and competence-building development, alongside VIE principles of transparent compensation and recognition, can sustain

motivation and engagement (Slemp et al., 2021). This integrated approach addresses structural equity concerns while leveraging intrinsic drivers to improve resilience, innovation, and performance across sectors. By blending expectancy theory with SDT, leaders can design jobs and incentives that support both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, ensuring long-term organizational success (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Combining SDT and VIE creates a dual lens: SDT explains *why* intrinsic motivation matters, while VIE explains *how* cognitive expectations shape effort. Leaders should design systems in which autonomy-supportive practices coexist with clear performance–reward contingencies. This synergy ensures that intrinsic drivers (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and extrinsic expectations (effort–performance–outcome) jointly sustain engagement and innovation.

Practice Guidance: Integrating SDT Across People Systems

Organizational leaders should adopt autonomy-supportive leadership standards, ethical and inclusive behaviors, and digital leadership norms to enhance psychological need satisfaction and reduce burnout. Slemp et al. (2024) demonstrated that autonomy-supportive leadership significantly improves employee engagement and well-being, while Li and Tang (2022) highlighted the role of inclusive practices in reducing stress and fostering belonging in hybrid teams. By prioritizing autonomy-supportive behaviors, such as offering choice, acknowledging employee perspectives, and minimizing controlling language, leaders create conditions that satisfy employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ethical and inclusive norms further strengthen trust and psychological safety, which are critical in diverse and hybrid work environments

(Mohase, Donald, & Israel, 2025). Digital leadership standards ensure equitable participation and clarity in virtual settings, mitigating isolation and communication gaps. Embedding these practices into leadership development programs and performance metrics may cultivate a culture that supports intrinsic motivation and resilience, ultimately reducing burnout and improving organizational health. Leaders should be trained to clarify performance expectations (expectancy), communicate reward contingencies (instrumentality), and align outcomes with employee values (valence).

Transparent reward systems, informational recognition, and published growth pathways convert effort into commitment while preserving intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasized that extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation if perceived as controlling, whereas informational feedback enhances competence and engagement. Slemp et al. (2024) further advocated for transparent career progression to strengthen commitment. When employees clearly understand advancement criteria and see tangible growth opportunities, they experience greater autonomy and competence. Recognition that focuses on learning and contribution rather than compliance reinforces intrinsic drivers, reducing dependency on external incentives. This approach aligns with SDT principles by ensuring that rewards serve as informational cues rather than controlling levers. Implementing transparent career maps and recognition programs that celebrate effort and collaboration. Leaders should ensure transparent career maps and recognition programs explicitly link performance to advancement (instrumentality) and emphasize outcomes employees value (valence).

Tracking psychological need satisfaction and related indicators enables iterative improvement and prevents program drift. McAnally and Hagger (2024) argued that continuous measurement of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential for maintaining alignment with SDT principles. Metrics such as psychological safety, engagement, and innovation outputs provide actionable insights for leaders. Without systematic measurement, organizations risk reverting to controlling practices that erode motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2025). Research in SDT consistently shows that controlling environments thwart autonomy, competence, and relatedness, resulting in declines in intrinsic motivation and well-being. Ryan and Deci (2025) emphasize that external reward-driven or controlling practices can diminish intrinsic motivation and undermine need satisfaction, especially when organizations fail to maintain autonomy-supportive conditions.

Team-level feedback loops allow for timely adjustments, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and effective. Monitoring burnout and retention alongside innovation outcomes creates a holistic view of organizational health. Establishing dashboards and quarterly retrospectives will institutionalize learning and adaptation, embedding SDT principles into the organization's operating rhythm. Leaders should track perceptions of expectancy and instrumentality alongside SDT metrics to identify gaps in motivational architecture.

Integrative Review Conclusion

In this integrative review I synthesized scholar-practitioner evidence to address the persistent challenge of sustaining employee motivation in nonprofit organizations

operating under resource constraints and hybrid work conditions. I highlighted self-determination theory (SDT) as the foundational framework for fostering intrinsic motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while Vroom's expectancy theory (VIE) complemented this by clarifying the cognitive processes that link effort to valued outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vroom, 1964). Evidence consistently demonstrated that autonomy-supportive leadership, ethical and inclusive practices, and psychological safety are critical drivers of engagement and resilience, reducing burnout and enabling innovation even in constrained environments (Bahadurzada et al., 2024; Li & Tang, 2022; Slemp et al., 2024). Employee motivation remains a cornerstone of organizational effectiveness, yet nonprofit leaders face persistent challenges in sustaining engagement and innovation under resource constraints and evolving work models.

Further, in the review, I emphasized the importance of digital leadership capabilities in hybrid contexts, mission-aligned total rewards systems that preserve intrinsic motivation, and transparent communication that reinforces expectancy and instrumentality (G. G. Anderson & Gilin, 2024; Caniëls, 2023; Tautz et al., 2024). By integrating SDT and VIE principles across leadership behaviors, reward structures, and organizational culture, nonprofits can create a holistic motivational architecture that sustains performance and well-being. Continuous measurement of psychological need satisfaction, engagement, and innovation ensures adaptability and long-term success (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Ultimately, this evidence-based approach positions nonprofit leaders to transform resource limitations into opportunities for growth, resilience, and mission-driven impact.

Summary

This section establishes the foundation for a qualitative single-case study exploring leadership strategies nonprofit organization (NPO) leaders use to motivate employees by synthesizing the background, problem, purpose, methodology, and theoretical grounding into a coherent whole. The background highlights that employee motivation is critical for mission fulfillment and organizational performance in NPOs, yet remains a complex leadership challenge, particularly in resource-constrained contexts in which intrinsic, mission-centered motivation predominates over financial incentives. Leadership support strongly influences engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment, while failures to satisfy employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness lead to demotivation; therefore, leaders must intentionally create environments that support these needs. The section identifies the core business problem, that NPO leaders lack effective strategies to motivate employees, and states the study's purpose: to explore leadership strategies NPO leaders use to motivate employees. A qualitative single-case study design was adopted to explore this real-world problem within a bounded context, using purposeful sampling of five NPO leaders in Ethiopia's Tigray region who had successfully implemented motivational strategies. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and organizational documents and analyzed using Yin's 5-step model with triangulation to enhance rigor, while trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, reflexivity, data saturation, and ethical rigor. The conceptual framework integrates self-determination theory and expectancy theory to address both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of motivation, explaining how autonomy support,

inclusive practices, trust-building, and clear effort–performance–outcome linkages enhance motivation and performance. The section also acknowledges key assumptions and limitations, addresses ethical considerations aligned with The Belmont Report, and concludes by emphasizing that leadership strategies fostering intrinsic motivation, psychological safety, and mission alignment are essential for enhancing employee engagement and organizational success.

Section 2: Primary and Secondary Industry Data Analysis

In Section 1, I focused on reviewing academic literature on motivational theories, discussed the SDT and other alternative theories of motivation, factors affecting motivation, leadership strategies leaders employ to motivate employees, employee motivation in the nonprofit sector, and the link between employee motivation, job satisfaction, work engagement, and performance. In Section 2, I discussed the nature of the project, describing the research method and selection of the design. I described how I planned to conduct the case study and ensured data reliability through data saturation, member checking, and triangulation, as appropriate to my data collection methods. I described the project population and the eligibility criteria used to select project participants. I detailed the role of the researcher, the strategies used to gain access to the selected participants, and the strategies for developing a relationship with them. I described and justified the sampling method, the number of participants, and identified how I determined data saturation. I discussed the data collection activities, identifying the data collection instruments, collection process and the rationale for an interview protocol. I explained the data collection instruments, techniques, process, and protocol, describing the techniques used to collect data and identifying where in the appendices the instrument is located. I described the system for organizing and tracking data techniques and analyses, and the emerging understandings. I end with a concise summary of the key points of this section.

Nature of the Project

Research Method and Design

This case study employed a qualitative design to explore leadership strategies for motivating employees in nonprofit organizations in a real-world, contextualized setting. Researchers can choose from three research methods to conduct a study: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers seek to gain an understanding of a population, organization, event, or phenomenon, aiming to explore through open discourse with participants and an in-depth investigation of multiple sources of evidence (Lim, 2025; Oranga & Matere, 2023). The qualitative method was an appropriate approach for this research project because my purpose was to explore and understand the deeper meaning of a phenomenon regarding leadership and employee motivation through open dialogue with participants and an in-depth investigation of relevant supporting documents. I considered three research designs: (a) phenomenology, (b) ethnography, and (c) case study. Researchers use a case study design to explore a real-world problem within a bounded, contextual setting (Dahwa, 2024; Salmons, 2023; Yin, 2018). A case study design was the optimal choice because I was exploring strategies nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees within the nonprofit sector. Given the selection of a qualitative case study design, purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into leadership strategies and employee motivation within the nonprofit context.

Reliability in Qualitative Research: Data Saturation, Member Checking, and Triangulation

In qualitative research, reliability is conceptualized not as statistical consistency but as the trustworthiness of the analytic process and the soundness of the resulting interpretations. Rather than relying on quantitative indicators of instrument stability or measurement precision, qualitative scholars emphasize the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to safeguard methodological rigor (Smith & Noble, 2025). Achieving reliability, therefore, depends on the researcher's ability to demonstrate that findings are grounded in participants' experiences and systematically verified throughout the research project.

Data Saturation as a Reliability Strategy

Data saturation is a foundational mechanism for enhancing dependability and interpretive accuracy. Saturation is reached when additional data no longer yield new concepts, insights, or thematic developments (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Integrating data saturation into the analytic process ensures that interpretations are comprehensive and not prematurely derived from incomplete evidence. In the present case study, saturation was monitored through iterative continuous comparison across interviews, documents, and field observations. As themes stabilized across multiple data sources, the convergence indicated that analysis had reached sufficient depth to support reliable findings. By grounding interpretations in saturated, recurring patterns, the case study minimized the risk of overlooking divergent perspectives or producing analytically thin conclusions.

Member Checking to Enhance Credibility and Confirmability

Member checking further strengthened reliability by allowing participants to verify the accuracy and neutrality of the emerging interpretations. As scholars noted, participant validation is a primary means of enhancing credibility and confirmability because it provides direct feedback on whether interpretations authentically reflect participants' lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016; Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). In this case study, member checking occurred through a structured, multi-step process in which anonymized summaries of interview analysis were returned to participants for review. Participants were encouraged to confirm factual accuracy, highlight misunderstandings, and add clarifications. Their refinements were integrated into subsequent analytic cycles, reinforcing interpretive precision and reducing researcher bias. This reflexive, collaborative process aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing that member checking should be iterative and participatory to avoid power imbalances and enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative evidence (McKim, 2023; Motulsky, 2021). Member checking enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the study findings.

Triangulation to Support Dependability and Analytical Rigor

Methodological triangulation, drawn from multiple data sources and analytic perspectives, also contributed substantively to the reliability of the findings. Triangulation is widely recognized as a central strategy for mitigating subjectivity and strengthening the dependability of qualitative research (Ahmed, 2024; Lindheim, 2022). In this case study, triangulation involved systematically comparing themes across interviews, organizational documents, and field observations. This cross-source

convergence ensured that interpretations were supported by multiple strands of evidence rather than isolated accounts. Following guidance provided by scholars such as Janis (2022) and Schlunegger et al. (2024), the analysis incorporated structured cross-method comparisons and reflexive interpretation to verify consistency and enhance analytic depth. Through this multi-layered approach, triangulation minimized bias, highlighted corroborating evidence, and strengthened the dependability of the case study's conclusions.

Integrated Contribution to Reliability

Together, data saturation, member checking, and triangulation provided complementary mechanisms that reinforced the overall reliability and trustworthiness of this qualitative case study. Saturation ensured analytic completeness, member checking validated interpretive accuracy, and triangulation enhanced methodological rigor by confirming themes across diverse evidence. These strategies collectively addressed common critiques of qualitative research, such as insufficient methodological justification or a lack of analytic transparency, by embedding systematic verification throughout the research process (Flick, 2023; Smith & Noble, 2025). As a result, the case study's findings are credible, dependable, and transferable to similar contexts, demonstrating a rigorous approach to qualitative reliability.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

Population and Sampling Strategy

Academic researchers require some basic knowledge on the important aspects of application of systematic standards for conducting and evaluating qualitative research,

which include the appropriate selection of the study population and sampling of the research participants (Boros, 2018; T. Schaefer, 2016). Casteel and Bridier (2021) explained that a study population represents the specific group of individuals, including all those eligible and available, from which data are collected to explore the phenomenon of interest. The sampling plan, which specifies the sampling method, sample size, and the procedure for recruiting participants, links to the choice of research method (Moser & Korstens, 2017). In this case study, I linked the sampling plan to the choice of the qualitative research method and the single-case study design and selected purposive sampling to identify information-rich nonprofit leaders whose roles and experiences align with the phenomenon of motivating employees.

Several foundational qualitative researchers established purposive (purposeful) selection as the dominant logic for qualitative inquiry because it maximizes the yield of information relative to the research aim (Gentles et al., 2015; Moser & Korstens, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015; Yemini, 2018). Moser and Korstens (2017), in agreement with Palinkas et al. (2015), commented that purposive sampling restricts selection of participants by identifying and deliberately selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest, with no consideration for randomness (Moser & Korstens, 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015). Besides their knowledge and experience, researchers select participants based on their availability and willingness to participate (Palinkas et al., 2015). Newer management-methods work further to clarify purposeful case/informant alignment and the need to consider the level of analysis (e.g., organization vs. individual) to anticipate

complementarity and divergence across informants, choices that shape the eventual path to saturation (Bouncken et al., 2025; Palinkas et al., 2015). Recent guidance emphasized harmonizing informants and planning for saturation across cases (Bouncken et al., 2025). Aligning sampling with the research project purpose strengthens coherence and anticipates variation critical for theory building (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). This alignment informs defensible decisions about sample size and saturation. In this doctoral research study, I used a purposive sampling technique.

I chose a purposive sample, selecting one NPO in Ethiopia to explore the leadership strategies nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees. The three main qualifications for participants' inclusion in this case study sample are that (a) they should be working as business leaders and have knowledge and experience about how they apply motivational strategies, (b) they should be employed in the NPO sector, and (c) have successful strategies that they are using to motivate employees within their department. The targeted population for this qualitative case study was five leaders, purposively selected, working in an NPO in Ethiopia, who have demonstrated the ability to motivate their employees. The leaders, consisting of one chief executive director, one deputy executive director, and 10 departmental heads, qualify as participants based on their roles and responsibilities to motivate employees within the selected NPO. I requested those who met all the criteria and were willing to participate to sign consent forms. I excluded any department heads who did not meet all the sampling criteria but aimed to maintain at least five participants.

Strategies for Gaining Access to the Selected Participants

The recruitment of participants for qualitative research is one of the most challenging aspects of a research project, and the failure to devise strategies for gaining access to participants poses a threat to the quality of the research (Archibald & Munce, 2015). The most frequently used recruitment methods identified in the literature were non-probability approaches for qualitative studies (Lysaght et al., 2018). According to Lysaght et al. (2018), the use of multiple recruitment strategies and the heavy reliance on convenience sampling are evidence of researchers' struggles with participant recruitment. According to Leung (2015), qualitative researchers need to fulfil the dual core criteria of *transparency* and *systematicity* for their research to be considered high-quality research. In my research, I used transparent, systematic methods to gain access to study participants. Moser and Korstens (2017) expanded on the notion of dual criteria of transparency and systematicity and argued that the critical first step researchers take when accessing potential clients is to select settings and situations where participants live. Moser and Korstens (2017) recommended recruitment of participants who bear the following characteristics: (a) provide the richest detailed information, (b) are knowledgeable on the phenomenon, (c) can articulate and reflect on the phenomenon, and (d) are motivated to communicate at length and in depth with the researcher. In my case study, the setting and the situation are the NPO sector.

In my case study, business leaders' experience of motivation strategies in NPOs was a criterion for selection. Fraser et al. (2018) demonstrated the application of the requirement for knowledge and experience as a prerequisite for study participation.

Gaining the perspective of business leaders provided me with valuable insights on motivation strategies that will be helpful in designing and implementing support mechanisms, and strategies that can enhance employee motivation in the NPO sector. I also applied various approaches to gain access to participants. Moser and Korstens (2017) recommended that researchers use personal social private networks to identify and invite potential respondents by means of personal invitations, including letters.

Effective participant recruitment in qualitative case studies relies on deliberate, ethically appropriate strategies that facilitate access to knowledgeable participants while fostering trust and engagement. Flynn et al. (2018) used email as a strategy to establish contact with research participants prior to research visits to announce the researcher's visits. By communicating prior by email, the researchers reinforced the relationship between the research team and the participants, which can potentially contribute to richer qualitative data, and higher participation rates (Flynn et al., 2018). Archibald and Munce (2015) pointed out that use of email and other technological advances offer new innovative domains for recruitment of study participants using social media. Manley et al. (2016) also recommended gatekeeping, in which the researcher uses individuals or organizations to assist in identifying potential study participants for recruitment. Together, these recruitment strategies strengthened access to appropriate participants, enhanced engagement, and supported the credibility and depth of the qualitative data collected for the case study.

In my case study, I used multiple methods to contact the business leaders, beginning with an initial face-to-face meeting followed by telephone and email

follow-ups. The rationale for using this systematic approach was to build rapport with the project participants and make them feel comfortable sharing their experiences in the main interview, as well as to encourage referrals to other potential candidates and support participation in the data analysis process. Isaacs (2014) argued that participant recruitment is primarily an ethical issue. In situations where pre-existing relationships or power imbalances exist between researchers and participants, it may be necessary to invite an advocate to help potential participants decide whether to take part in the research. Advocates may read or distribute explanatory statements to potential research participants, who can then obtain the researcher's contact details from the advocate (Isaacs, 2014). For my case study, I identified and selected potential advocates. The role of advocates was to introduce the research project to participants and help reduce any feelings of coercion related to participation.

Strategies for Developing Rapport with the Selected Participants

Researchers need to build rapport with the participants by creating an environment in which participants participate freely, lead the dialogue and engage meaningfully, and optimally. Archibald and Munce (2015) noted that researchers who maintain regular follow-up with prospective participants to inform them about the research study and engage in prolonged involvement can establish meaningful and authentic collaboration through non-research on related site visits. Researchers who conduct such site visits prior to data collection cultivate trust, improve data quality, and reduce any negative perceptions participants may hold about the research. I also worked toward identifying strategies for establishing and sustaining a working relationship with

participants throughout the research process. Sivell et al. (2019) described rapport building as a crucial component of qualitative research interviews for reducing researcher bias and mitigating power imbalances. In this research project, before each interview began, I took time to establish rapport with participants. I also built rapport by creating an environment that allowed participants to lead the dialogue, enabling them to demonstrate their status as equal partners in the research setting.

Sample Size and Data Saturation

Rather than setting a fixed number as a priority, the researcher prioritized data adequacy using saturation and information power to judge when additional interviews no longer added meaning. Several researchers, such as Holland (2017), Ngan (2015), and Wakefield and Blodgett (2016), conducted qualitative single-case study research using purposive samples of five or fewer participants and managed to reach data saturation with only three participants (Wakefield & Blodgett, 2016). The sample size in qualitative research is not a critical element. What is key is to reach data saturation and to ensure selection of the right participants with the appropriate experience as informed by the purpose of the research topic (Yin, 2018). Because my case study was a qualitative single-case study, like the research conducted by Ngan, and Wakefield and Blodgett, five participants were an appropriate sample size. Yin (2018) advised that the number of individuals who have the characteristics essential for the study's purpose may dictate the number of participants needed for a research project. The specific quantification of participant numbers and lengths of involvement may be difficult to give in advance, as

data saturation may determine the actual number of participants (Haines, 2017). I planned to interview at least five participants and continue until I reach data saturation.

Data Saturation

Qualitative researchers struggle with subjective judgment, unclear criteria, and pressure to stop early, while new themes might emerge late, making the process of data collection complex. Fusch and Ness (2015) acknowledged the challenges associated with the concept of data saturation. According to Gentles et al. (2015), saturation refers to reaching a point of informational redundancy, the point where additional data collection contributes nothing new to the research. Data saturation is widely recognized as an indicator that sufficient data collection has been achieved (Fusch & Ness, 2015). While reaching data saturation enables a researcher to collect sufficient, high-quality data to support the validity of a study's content, the point at which saturation is reached varies across study designs (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Failure to reach data saturation affects the quality of the research as well as hampers the validity of the content (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I continued the interviews until data saturation was reached with the fifth participant.

While there is no one-size-fits-all method to reach data saturation, due to the lack of universality in research designs, there is collective agreement on some general principles and concepts of data saturation that include no new data, no new themes, no new coding, and the ability to replicate the research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Although interview data might become repetitive, after the first five participants, I continued to document data from interviewing all the 12 departmental heads and confirmed that I had

reached data saturation on the fifth participant. Just because the first five participants said the same thing, does not mean that the sixth to the 12th participants may not have anything new to add. I also presented my analyzed data to the participants to determine whether the narrative is accurate and is a true reflection of what the participants intended to convey and asked the participants to contribute additional data and to provide new insights into their experiences.

Researchers who apply case study design, because of the small sample sizes, have the potential to provide rich, quality, and thick data in terms of quantity (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Naidoo et al., 2018). A researcher who uses *thick description* in documenting all aspects of the research, detailing how the research project was done and concluded, provides an audit trail to help consumers of the research independently judge its merits on their own (T. Schaefer, 2016). Fusch and Ness (2015) defined rich data as layered, detailed, and nuanced (Fusch & Ness, 2015). As noted by Haradhan (2017), how participants produce subjective data understand their experiences in the social world, and represent their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, affects the thickness and richness of the data. Complementarily, information power argues that the more specific the aim, the more specialized the sample, the stronger the theory use, and the higher the interview quality, the fewer participants are needed (Malterud et al., 2016). Combining saturation tracking (code and meaning) with information-power criteria makes the sample-size rationale transparent and context-sensitive, well suited to a single-case design with specialized informants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Malterud et al., 2016). With adequacy criteria in place, the design can focus on efficient recruitment of qualified leaders.

Data Collection Activities

Researcher as Primary Data Collecting Instrument (Role and Reflexivity)

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument of data collection and analysis. The central role of the researcher as a primary instrument enables reflexivity; ongoing, critical self-examination, essential to rigor and credibility (Clark & Vealé, 2018; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Suselo, 2018; Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). While conducting interviews, the researcher's role is to listen and observe the discussions, intervening as little as possible (J. Yates & Leggett, 2016). Contemporary methodological guidance frames reflexivity as a continuous, multifaceted practice that documents how a researcher's positionality, context, and interactions shape decisions at every stage of inquiry (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Recent scholars emphasized relational and power dimensions of the reflexivity, moving beyond self-reflection to relational reflexivity that situates the researcher within broader social structures (Thomas, 2024). As the researcher of my case study, I was the main data collection instrument.

As the main data collection instrument, in this case study, I used a reflexive journal and brief post-interview memos to surface assumptions, record decision trails, and examine how my interactions may influence meaning-making. This practice is consistent with contemporary guidance on researcher-as-instrument rigor, strengthens transparency, and helps readers evaluate trustworthiness (Ahmed, 2024; Lindheim, 2022). Embedding reflexivity clarified my role as an instrument and underpinned the integrity of subsequent semistructured interviewing and analytic decisions (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Together, these reflexive practices informed the design, conduct, and

interpretation of the interviews, ensuring alignment between data collection methods and the study's qualitative aims.

Semistructured Interviews (Open-Ended Questions & Probes)

I conducted semistructured interviews (SSI) with open-ended questions and probes to explore leadership strategies nonprofit leaders used to motivate employees. Researchers used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and probes to elicit rich, relevant accounts, while balancing structure with flexibility (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Reviews and reference entries show SSIs maintain topical focus and comparability across participants while allowing discovery and depth through probing (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). To reduce retrospective bias, I used a formal interview protocol that standardized core questions while preserving probe-driven flexibility, focusing on concrete activities, events, and outcomes to clarify meaning and context (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This approach supported the systematic yet in-depth exploration of leadership strategies nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees.

Interview Protocol and Standardization

I used a semistructured interview protocol to ensure consistent core questions across participants while allowing probes (see Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016). Methodological guidance recommends a five-phase cycle: prerequisites, prior knowledge, draft guide, piloting, and finalization, alongside the IPR framework to align questions with research aims and conversational flow (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Kallio et al., 2016). I piloted the guide, refined wording and order, and embedded prompts for

reflexive memoing. Researchers embedded prompts for reflexive memoing to enhance reliability and analytic coherence (Kallio et al., 2016). The finalized protocol (Appendix B) also specified recording and transcription documentation to meet reporting standards (see Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014). To enhance rigor, consistency, and alignment with the study's aims, I developed and implemented a systematically designed semistructured interview protocol.

Recording, Transcription and Field Notes

Systematic recording, transcription, and documentation practices were used to enhance analytic rigor and data integrity in this study. With consent, interviews were digitally recorded and accompanied by field notes capturing contextual details and nonverbal cues to enhance analytic rigor (see Levitt et al., 2018; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Field notes preserve essential context for primary and secondary analysis; reporting standards call for transparency about transcription choices, data handling, and integrity checks (Levitt et al., 2018; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). I used a standardized transcription workflow (speaker IDs, timestamps, audit checks), documented human accuracy safeguards, and triangulated transcripts with memoed observations, reflecting current guidance on transcription in digital contexts (see Eftekhari, 2024; McMullin, 2021; Pacheco-Vega, 2019). These practices support multimodal analysis in which appropriate, integrating transcript, audio, and video cues (Craig et al., 2021). By applying these procedures collectively, I ensured that the interview data were accurately documented, contextually grounded, and analytically robust, providing a solid foundation for subsequent analysis.

Interview Mode and Duration (Face-to-Face and Virtual)

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or virtually through videoconference to maximize access and depth, with each session targeting approximately one hour to balance participant burden and analytic sufficiency. Evidence indicates that platforms such as Zoom can yield high-quality qualitative data when security, rapport, and logistics are carefully managed, and that interview mode may influence elaboration and session length (Archibald et al., 2019). I implemented secure settings (e.g., passwords, waiting rooms), verified participant identities, tested equipment, and tailored pacing to participant needs, reporting interview mode and duration in accordance with qualitative standards (see Hicks et al., 2021; Levitt et al., 2018). Mode and timing decisions were documented in both the interview protocol and the study report (see Levitt et al., 2018). To ensure methodological rigor while maximizing participant access and data quality, interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually through videoconference.

Observations and Archival Documents (Triangulation)

Methodological rigor in this case study was enhanced through systematic triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness. To strengthen credibility, interviews were complemented by interview observation and archival/document analysis (e.g., annual reports, policies, manuals) for triangulation (see Mtisi, 2022; Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation combines multiple sources and methods to reduce single-source bias and provide richer explanations of complex phenomena; multimodal coding can integrate audio/video with transcripts (Craig et al., 2021; Noble & Heale, 2019). I collected documents before and

after interviews to contextualize and test convergence/divergence, using analytic memos to track complementarity or discrepancies (see Mtisi, 2022). These integrated sources supported robust case descriptions and strengthened trustworthiness of findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). Collectively, the use of triangulated data sources and integrative analytic practices reinforced the credibility of the findings and provided a comprehensive, contextually grounded understanding of the case.

Member Checking (Use and Considerations)

After interpreting the data, I shared the interpretations with participants. Sharing interpretations with participants for accuracy can enhance credibility when used judiciously and reported transparently (see Birt et al., 2016). Recent evaluations caution that member checking is not universally beneficial; structured approaches and early planning improve its utility and reduce unintended consequences (N. Lloyd et al., 2024; McKim, 2023). I employed synthesized or structured member checking selectively (e.g., summaries of interpretations for clarification) and reported the rationale, timing, participant burden, and any changes arising from feedback (see Birt et al., 2016; McKim, 2023). Decisions about member checking were aligned with the research paradigm and reported according to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) to support transparency (see Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014). Overall, the selective and transparent use of member checking supported interpretive rigor while aligning with qualitative reporting standards and the study's epistemological stance.

Researchers use member checking to give participants the opportunity to attest to the consistency, neutrality, and trustworthiness of research data and to confirm that the

researcher's interpretation accurately reflects their perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Smith & Noble, 2025). In my case study, I used member checking to support dependable, credible, confirmable, and transferable findings. During this process, researchers typically transcribe interviews, prepare a summary of the information, share the summary with each participant, allow participants to review it for inconsistencies, and make corrections or add relevant information (Belz & Binder, 2017). Accordingly, I transcribed the interviews, prepared a summary of the information, and shared the summary with each participant to review for accuracy and enhance the dependability of the data collection process.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

Data Organization Framework

When conducting research interviews, researchers produce a large amount of data that must be structured and analyzed systematically. Yin (2018) suggested that qualitative researchers should establish a system for organizing data before beginning analysis. Researchers who organize and structure research data around a well-defined framework as an analytical tool for thematic analysis reduce errors, improve quality through efficient data management, and ensure that concepts remain grounded in the original data after synthesis (Naeem et al., 2023). To reduce retrospective bias, researchers often rely on structured systems for organizing data, including logs, tracking sheets, and other management tools that support consistency and transparency throughout the analytic process (Chandrasekar et al., 2024). Together, these structured approaches establish a

rigorous foundation for organizing qualitative data in a manner that supports transparency, traceability, and high-quality analysis.

To organize my data, I used several data-organization techniques. I maintained a structured repository (e.g., transcripts, memos, field notes, document sets) with version control, indexing, and a simple to-do-list log to trace analytic decisions and data movement. This organizational foundation enabled consistent coding and cross-source comparison in subsequent thematic and content analyses. I used the rubric as a to-do list for organizing and presenting the content of this case study. During data collection and analysis, I maintained a research to-do list to ensure that I fulfilled all tasks and adhered to the protocols of the research project. I also used the interview questions (see Appendix A) as a guide when conducting the semistructured interviews with participants.

Tools: CAQDAS (NVivo) and Complementary Workflows

Researchers need modern digital tools to increase efficiency and effectiveness in analyzing qualitative research data. Qualitative researchers are increasingly using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) instead of manual methods to better store, index, sort, and code diverse types of qualitative data (Min et al., 2017). The use of CAQDAS, such as NVivo, can strengthen transparency and auditability by supporting code-based inquiry, memoing, and multi-source integration while the researcher remains the primary analytic engine (Dalkin et al., 2021; Zamawe, 2015). Many qualitative researchers use NVivo as their computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (Goldsmith, 2018; Min et al., 2017; Sepasgozar & Davis, 2018). NVivo provides a powerful workspace for qualitative analysis that enables researchers to track

sections of interviews and the ideas contained in the data without losing access to the original sources (Sepasgozar & Davis, 2018). NVivo has also been shown to facilitate explicit audit trails and iterative theory refinement, and practical guides and textbooks now cover both basic and advanced NVivo features to support efficient qualitative workflows (Dalkin et al., 2021; Mortelmans, 2025). I used NVivo 12 to support my qualitative data analysis by importing interviews, field notes, and documents; developing nodes, memos, and matrices; and running queries to check coding consistency across data sources.

Manual Coding with Word/Excel (Resource-Constrained Options)

Manual coding using Microsoft Word and Excel offers a practical, transparent, and resource-efficient alternative for qualitative data analysis while maintaining methodological rigor and an auditable chain of evidence. To avoid using complex and highly sophisticated software, Ose (2016) used a Word and Excel-based method to produce a flexible document of interview data organized into logical chapters and subchapters. Structured manual coding in Word and Excel can reliably organize large text corpora (Isangula et al., 2024; Ose, 2016). Researchers use Microsoft Word through a 10-step Word/Excel method, and recent step-by-step guides and templates provide structured approaches for coding, category charts, and theme matrices, supporting smaller studies and teaching contexts (Isangula et al., 2024; Ose, 2016). I used the Word and Excel tools to perform several functions that I could not complete using NVivo 12, including maintaining code logs in Excel and cross-walking these outputs with NVivo

nodes to preserve a single chain of evidence. This hybrid approach maintains accessibility while ensuring comparability and traceability across tools.

Privacy, Confidentiality, and Pseudonyms

Another approach to qualitative data organization involves structured workflows to systematically manage and integrate diverse qualitative materials during analysis. Research has shown that exporting and organizing qualitative data within well-defined workflows supports analytic rigor, transparency, and consistency throughout the qualitative research process (Chandrasekar et al., 2024). With participants' permission, I recorded interviews on a Samsung smartphone and an audio-recording device and transferred the audio files to a password-protected computer for review and secure storage. In addition, researchers use reflective journals to deepen their understanding of the literature and the research topic (Wyatt & Pasamar Márquez, 2016). Researchers also take field notes and maintain reflective journals to capture details about the interview environment and participants' reactions, aiding recall of key observations (X. Liu, 2018). I used a reflective journal to document the data-collection process and to examine my observations of participants' experiences during data collection. Along with audio-recording the interviews, I used handwritten notes to journal my observations and maintained an audit trail by storing all field notes on a password-protected computer.

I enforced privacy-policy procedures throughout the data-organization process. Enforcing privacy-policy procedures is necessary to protect participants (Landwehr, 2016). Participants' information and company documents remained protected. To maintain confidentiality, researchers recommend the use of participant codes or

pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) as identifiers (Hansen et al., 2017). To protect participants' privacy, I assigned alphanumeric pseudonyms to each participant. Protecting identities requires more than changing names; qualitative researchers should minimize linkable demographic details and clearly document anonymization decisions (Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Pascale et al., 2022). Ethical guidelines and recent scholarship recommend nuanced pseudonym strategies and disclosure-avoidance methods due to modern reidentification risks (Pascale et al., 2022; Tolich, 2017). In alignment with these recommendations, I assigned alphanumeric pseudonyms, stored an encrypted key separately, reported characteristics at the group level, and omitted nonessential identifiers from quotations. These practices align with institutional policy and strengthen confidentiality while preserving analytic utility.

Transcription Quality and Audit Trails

Ensuring high-quality transcription and maintaining a comprehensive audit trail are essential methodological practices for strengthening rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness in qualitative research. Transparent transcription workflows and audit trails enhance dependability and confirmability in qualitative studies (Carcary, 2020; Levitt et al., 2018). Digital transcription methods and audit procedures require documenting human versus AI steps, conducting accuracy checks, and maintaining accessible audit-trail artifacts (Eftekhari, 2024). I transcribed the data with accuracy checks, tagged segments with timestamps and speaker identifiers, retained memos and analytic decisions, and compiled an audit trail that included raw data, data reductions,

syntheses, and process notes. The audit trail supported external review, and internal reliability checks throughout the analysis.

Data Analysis Approaches: Yin's Case Study Steps, Reflexive TA, and Content Analysis

Qualitative case study data analysis requires systematic transcription, coding, and methodological triangulation to organize large volumes of data and generate credible, theory-informed interpretations. Researchers using different qualitative designs may employ varying analytic procedures (Carter et al., 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015). After transcribing data, the researcher should read the transcript while listening to the recording to correct errors and anonymize identifiable information (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Reducing large amounts of raw data through coding enables the identification of thematic patterns and supports interpretation of findings in relation to research questions and theoretical frameworks (Carter et al., 2014; Zawawi, 2018). I used coding techniques to organize and reduce the transcribed data into thematic patterns to support interpretation. Case study researchers use methodological triangulation to compare data from multiple sources, such as interviews and document reviews, to enhance reliability and deepen understanding (Flick, 2023; Fusch & Ness, 2015). I used methodological triangulation during analysis to compare interview, observation, and archival data. Methodological triangulation also enriches qualitative inquiry by enabling cross-checking across data sets (Fusch & Ness, 2015). J. Yates and Leggett (2016) used both deductive and inductive analysis in their qualitative research. By applying these approaches together, I ensured systematic data reduction, strengthened credibility through triangulation, and aligned the

analytic process with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. I used both deductive and inductive analysis throughout the data analysis process.

In this case study, I employed an integrated analytic approach combining Yin's structured case study steps with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) and content analysis to ensure methodological rigor and coherence across data sources. Qualitative data analysis is a linear-and-iterative process involving the description, classification, and interconnection of phenomena as researchers transcribe, organize, and code data (Naidoo et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) encouraged researchers to analyze case study data by examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or recombining narrative and numerical evidence. Many case study researchers apply Yin's five-step approach (compile, disassemble, reassemble, interpret, conclude) alongside RTA and content analysis as appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Chauhan et al., 2016; Elo et al., 2014; Kegler et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Recent RTA scholarship emphasizes researcher reflexivity, iterative theme development, and clear reporting standards, with detailed examples illustrating best practices and the six phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). I used Yin's five-step analysis process and employed thematic analysis to interpret the data. My analytic process included familiarization, code generation, theme construction, theme review, theme definition, and producing analytic narratives. Documentary materials were analyzed using content analysis phases, including preparation, organization, and reporting. Combining Yin's structured procedures with RTA and content analysis strengthened analytic depth, coherence, and reflexive rigor across interviews,

observations, and archival sources. By integrating these complementary approaches, I achieved methodological rigor and analytic coherence across all data types.

Compiling Data

In the first step, researchers should organize their data into a database to enable meaningful analysis. Several researchers work through the large volume of interview data by categorizing and coding it to make the information usable for analysis (Hagen et al., 2017; Zawawi, 2018). During the compiling phase, McIntosh and Morse (2015) recommended transcribing audio recordings verbatim to protect participant privacy by identifying and removing information that may compromise confidentiality. Naidoo et al. (2018) and Clark and Vealé (2018), consistent with Yin (2018), encouraged researchers to begin data analysis by listening to all audio recordings and reading the transcripts multiple times to identify promising patterns, insights, and concepts while forming a clear sense of what to analyze and why. After completing transcription, researchers should check the content against the recordings to ensure accuracy (McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Naidoo et al., 2018). In my case study, I began data analysis by listening to all recordings and reading all transcripts several times to identify emerging themes and categories, which I then organized into deductive codes.

Thematic analysis involves identifying major themes through the systematic organization and comparison of patterns within qualitative data. Researchers have noted that this process requires arranging similar and contrasting ideas across data sets to reveal central themes and underlying meanings (Bano et al., 2018). Clark and Vealé (2018) defined themes as outcomes of the coding and sorting process, and they

described patterns as words or phrases that are repetitive, regular, or consistently occurring in the data. While listening to the recordings and reviewing the transcripts, I listed words or phrases that appeared consistently throughout the data.

Content analysis is a widely used qualitative approach for systematically examining documents. It involves a structured three-phase process: preparation, organization, and reporting, to ensure rigorous and transparent analysis (Elo et al., 2014). In addition to reviewing the interview recordings, I used content analysis to examine my handwritten notes from face-to-face interviews and the document review process. Qualitative researchers also use Microsoft Word and Excel to aid the initial coding process and track characteristics within qualitative data (Ose, 2016). During my initial review of handwritten notes, I color-coded recurrent words, ideas, and concepts using a chart before entering the information into an Excel datasheet.

Disassembling Data

The disassembling phase of qualitative data analysis is a critical step in transforming compiled data into meaningful codes and higher-level conceptual categories. In this second stage of analysis, researchers divide the compiled data into smaller fragments and assign labels to them (Yin, 2018). Codes are used to represent the researchers' interpretation of the data based on their initial understanding and analytic insight (Zawawi, 2018). After this initial coding, researchers reread the data to deepen their understanding and enable cross-referencing to assess the validity and reliability of particular points (Zawawi, 2018). This phase is typically repeated multiple times, with researchers continually examining the categories, concepts, and codes for recurrence and

interconnectedness, and subsequently redefining them into higher-level codes (Hagen et al., 2017). In my study, I also repeated the disassembling phase several times to identify and refine the higher-level codes.

Reassembling Data

The reassembling stage of qualitative data analysis focuses on organizing previously coded data into coherent patterns and structures. During this third stage, researchers cluster and categorize codes into sequences and groups to support deeper interpretation and meaning making (Yin, 2018). Prior studies have shown that reassembling involves grouping initial codes into thematic categories, which are then refined and redefined into recurring and conceptually robust themes (Hagen et al., 2017; Hoerber et al., 2017; Sato & Haegele, 2017). Researchers may also use visual displays, such as tables or lists, to illustrate patterns and enhance analytic clarity during this phase (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In this study, I grouped the initial codes into thematic categories and iteratively refined and redefined them into higher-order categories and recurring themes. Given the exploratory nature of the case study, data analysis began inductively to allow themes to emerge from the data, and then proceeded deductively, using the developed codes to systematically identify and categorize relevant excerpts within the interview transcripts. This reassembling process facilitated the transition from fragmented codes to integrated thematic interpretations, providing a coherent foundation for subsequent analysis and the development of conclusions.

Interpreting Data

Building on the compiling, disassembling, and reassembling stages, the interpretation phase focuses on constructing analytic narratives that explain patterns and themes in relation to the research questions. During this fourth stage, researchers synthesize coded data into meaningful interpretations that clarify how the findings address the research questions and, in some cases, reveal new areas for inquiry (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yates & Leggett, 2016). Interpretation is iterative, requiring repeated engagement with the data, emerging propositions, and relevant literature to deepen understanding and achieve data saturation (Belz & Binder, 2017; Holland, 2017). To strengthen interpretive credibility, researchers may conduct additional member checking by sharing analyzed narratives with participants for confirmation and clarification (Sato & Haegele, 2017). In this study, I verified interpretations through participant feedback and incorporated additional insights until themes became repetitive and adequately saturated (see Cypress, 2017). By applying this iterative interpretation process, I ensured that the findings were credible, well substantiated, and firmly grounded in participants' perspectives.

Concluding Data

As the researcher, in the final stage and conclusion phase, I was responsible for bringing the study to closure by presenting the research findings, linking the results to the conceptual framework, and noting key themes and subthemes to inform other researchers and leaders on strategies to motivate employees. According to McIntosh and Morse (2015), results obtained from semistructured interviews primarily constitute descriptive

summaries that represent the end products of analysis and serve as entry points for future research. The end product of semistructured interview research is knowledge that validates, refines, or extends existing understanding. Clark and Vealé (2018) identified two strategies researchers commonly use to present themes emerging from coded data: listing the top themes by extracting patterns that appear most representative of the study or using the trinity strategy by discussing the three major patterns or themes that stand out in the data. In this study, I presented the three main emerging themes as reported by the participants, without attempting to validate personal assumptions or misconceptions. I aligned these key themes with the literature, including recent studies published after the initial proposal, as well as with the conceptual framework. I discussed each theme in relation to whether it aligned with or diverged from the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation. When presenting qualitative findings, researchers often include excerpts from participants' responses to support the generated codes and categories (Naidoo et al., 2018). Consistent with this practice, I incorporated direct quotes from participants to support and substantiate the findings.

Triangulation and Integration Across Sources

Methodological and data triangulation are essential analytic strategies for enhancing credibility in qualitative research through the systematic comparison of multiple data sources. By deliberately examining interviews, observations, and documents, researchers use triangulation to reduce single-source bias and support more robust and trustworthy interpretations (Noble & Heale, 2019). Analytical tools such as NVivo queries and matrix coding can operationalize cross-source comparisons, while

manually constructed matrices provide an effective alternative when access to advanced software is limited (Dalkin et al., 2021; Ose, 2016). In this study, I developed cross-tabulation matrices that mapped data sources against emerging themes to identify convergence and divergence, which informed the iterative refinement of codes and themes. These integrated analytic displays guided interpretation and reporting processes aligned with SRQR and JARS-Qual standards, thereby strengthening the transparency and rigor of the findings.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity have traditionally served as the primary criteria for evaluating the quality of research instruments, particularly within the quantitative research paradigm. Reliability and validity are widely regarded as the two most important features in the evaluation of measurement instruments used in research (Haradhan, 2017). However, these concepts are most closely associated with quantitative research methodologies (Haradhan, 2017). In quantitative studies, reliability refers to the extent to which measurement instruments minimize random error, whereas validity concerns how accurately an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Haradhan, 2017). Consequently, the assessment of research quality in quantitative inquiry has historically relied on the statistical consistency, precision, and accuracy of measurement instruments. Because these criteria are rooted in quantitative assumptions, their direct application to qualitative research requires careful reconsideration.

Qualitative research adopts alternative criteria for evaluating methodological rigor that align with its philosophical foundations and interpretive goals. Researchers have

raised concerns about rigor in qualitative research, citing issues such as insufficient methodological justification, limited transparency in analytical procedures, and potential researcher bias (Smith & Noble, 2025). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry is grounded in distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions, necessitating tailored approaches for evaluating the integrity of the research process (Smith & Noble, 2025). Regardless of methodological orientation, researchers remain responsible for ensuring the accuracy, rigor, and soundness of their findings (Haradhan, 2017; Smith & Noble, 2025). Smith and Noble (2025) emphasized that qualitative researchers should intentionally incorporate strategies to ensure trustworthiness from the outset of the study. Accordingly, qualitative case study research emphasizes credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and data saturation as the primary criteria for establishing rigor and trustworthiness (Ahmed, 2024; Lindheim, 2022). By applying these trustworthiness criteria throughout the research process, qualitative researchers can address long-standing concerns about rigor, transparency, and bias while producing credible and meaningful findings.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research concerns the consistency and stability of findings when the research process is applied systematically and transparently. Yin (2018) noted that reliability refers to the ability to obtain comparable results if other researchers reproduce the study using the same procedures. Other scholars have similarly posited that, within qualitative inquiry, dependability reflects the stability and consistency of findings when the research process is repeated under comparable conditions (Fusch &

Ness, 2015). Several researchers have recommended the use of a standardized interview protocol with each participant to enhance dependability (Holland, 2017). To ensure dependability in my study, I used the same interview protocol with all interviewees. I grounded the research in relevant theoretical foundations, identified gaps in the literature on employee motivation within the NPO sector, and supported the findings with evidence from peer-reviewed studies. Through this process, I ensured that the study's conclusions were dependable to the extent that they aligned with and contributed to existing knowledge on motivation.

In qualitative research, concerns about the truth value, consistency, trustworthiness, and neutrality of the data underscore the importance of establishing dependability (Smith & Noble, 2025). To further enhance the dependability of the data collection process, I incorporated member checking, a widely used quality-control strategy in qualitative research to assess the accuracy and credibility of the data (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking provides participants with the opportunity to confirm the consistency, neutrality, and trustworthiness of the data, ensuring that the researcher's interpretations accurately represent participants' perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Smith & Noble, 2025). Ensuring dependability in qualitative research requires deliberate and systematic strategies that support the truth value, consistency, and trustworthiness of the data throughout the research process.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is established by ensuring that participants' experiences are represented accurately and authentically through sustained engagement

and validation strategies. Credibility refers to the accurate and truthful depiction of participants' lived experiences (Cypress, 2017). In my case study, I achieved credibility through prolonged engagement with business leaders, which enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of the NPO environment in which these leaders apply strategies to motivate employees. Persistent engagement with both the participants and their organizational context helped minimize distortions that could arise during the research process (Cypress, 2017). I further strengthened the credibility of the data by using member checking. Numerous scholars have highlighted that member checking enhances the validity of qualitative research by allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts (Birt et al., 2016; Holland, 2017). Validity in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings accurately depict the phenomenon under investigation (Birt et al., 2016; Holland, 2017). In this study, I reinforced credibility by providing participants with the opportunity to review their transcripts and verify that their insights were captured accurately.

Ensuring dependability in qualitative research requires intentional strategies that promote consistency, trustworthiness, and neutrality throughout the data collection and interpretation process. Dependability relates to the stability and reliability of the research findings across time and conditions, addressing concerns about truth value, consistency, and neutrality (Smith & Noble, 2025). To enhance dependability, I also employed member checking as a quality-control mechanism to assess the accuracy and coherence of the data (see Birt et al., 2016). Member checking affords participants the opportunity to confirm the trustworthiness of the data and ensures that the researcher's interpretations

accurately reflect their perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Smith & Noble, 2025). These deliberate strategies supported the overall dependability of the research process and strengthened the rigor of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability in this study was ensured through systematic reflexivity, transparent decision-making, and deliberate strategies to minimize researcher bias throughout the research process. Elo et al. (2014) described confirmability as the collective effort made by researchers to reduce bias, acknowledge assumptions and limitations, and provide clear justification for decisions taken during the research process. In alignment with this definition, I employed several strategies recommended by Smith and Noble (2025) to strengthen confirmability. These strategies included explicitly outlining personal biases that could influence the research, acknowledging potential bias inherent in the sampling procedures used to select case study participants, and critically appraising the research methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of the data collected. I also supported the findings by incorporating rich, thick verbatim descriptions of participants' experiences and perspectives on motivation and by documenting the interpretive processes followed during data analysis to enhance transparency and trustworthiness. Together, these practices strengthened the objectivity of the findings by demonstrating how conclusions were grounded in participants' narratives rather than researcher preconceptions.

Ongoing reflexivity played a central role in safeguarding the integrity and confirmability of the research process. Cypress (2017) recommended the use of a

reflexive journal to document introspective reflections relevant to qualitative inquiry. During the interview process, I remained consciously aware of my role as the researcher and actively guarded against assumptions, beliefs, and presuppositions that could distort participants' lived experiences, as emphasized by Carminati (2018). At the end of each day, I reviewed interview notes and reflexive journal entries to identify potential bias and recalibrate my approach where necessary. This continuous process of critical self-examination reinforced methodological rigor and ensured that participants' voices remained central throughout the study.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by providing a transparent and comprehensive account of the research context and procedures, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings. Traditional quality criteria used in quantitative research: such as internal validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity, are not suitable for evaluating qualitative inquiry (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Instead, qualitative research is assessed according to the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Houghton et al. (2013) described transferability as the process of presenting research in sufficient detail to allow others to judge whether the findings may apply in similar contexts. Consistent with this perspective, Carminati (2018) emphasized the importance of clearly describing the research context, the researcher's role, participant characteristics, the volume of data collected, and the analytical and interpretive procedures used. Providing such contextual

depth enables readers to make informed judgments about the relevance of the findings beyond the immediate study setting.

In this study I enhanced transferability through meticulous documentation and clear reporting throughout each phase of the research process. I provided detailed descriptions of participant recruitment procedures, data collection methods, and analytical steps, ensuring transparency from initial design to final interpretation. All stages of data analysis were comprehensively documented, including the emergence of themes and the development of interpretations from the data. Trustworthiness, in this regard, directly influences the degree to which readers perceive the findings as meaningful and applicable. By offering a clear and systematic account of the research process, this study enables future researchers and practitioners to assess the potential transferability of the findings to comparable organizational contexts.

Data Saturation

Data saturation was achieved through iterative data collection, ongoing analysis, and participant validation, ensuring the completeness and robustness of the findings. Data saturation occurs when further data collection no longer generates new insights but instead reproduces information already obtained (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017). Without achieving saturation, researchers are unable to produce credible or definitive qualitative findings (Holland, 2017). In this study, analyzed narratives were returned to participants to confirm accuracy and ensure that the interpretations reflected their intended meanings. Participants were also invited to contribute additional data or

insights based on their experiences. This iterative engagement ensured that the data fully captured the complexity of participants' perspectives.

Participant involvement during analysis further strengthened the attainment of data saturation and thematic accuracy. I shared my interpretations and emerging themes with participants and invited feedback, consistent with the approach recommended by Cypress (2017). Participants were encouraged to identify any missing or additional themes after the data had been categorized, allowing for deeper reflection and refinement of the findings. This process continued until the data became repetitive and no new insights emerged, indicating that saturation had been reached. Through this methodical and collaborative approach, I ensured that data saturation was not assumed but demonstrably achieved.

Summary

In Section 2, I outlined the qualitative research approach adopted for studying leadership strategies to motivate employees in nonprofit organizations. The rationale for selecting a case study design over phenomenology or ethnography was explained, emphasizing the suitability of a case study for examining real-world problems within a bounded context. Reliability and rigor were addressed through the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, supported by techniques such as member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity. The sampling strategy involved purposive selection of experienced nonprofit leaders, with recruitment facilitated through systematic and transparent procedures to ensure the collection of rich and relevant data. Data collection relied on semistructured interviews supplemented by observations and

document reviews, while NVivo and manual coding tools supported data organization and analysis using thematic and content analysis within Yin's five-step framework.

Ethical considerations: including confidentiality, participant pseudonyms, and secure data handling, were prioritized throughout the study. Finally, strategies for achieving data saturation and maintaining methodological rigor, including the use of audit trails, reflexive journaling, and methodological triangulation, underscored the researcher's commitment to producing credible and transferable findings.

Section 3: Data and Professional Practice

Section 3 includes an introduction, presentation of the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, and my recommendations for action and further research. Section 3 contains the research findings to the predominant research question, interview questions, and an investigation of the relation to the conceptual framework. This section also contains a thorough analysis of research findings' themes; discussions of how the findings and themes apply to leadership strategies that nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees. Also included in Section 3 is a complete analysis of the research findings, with my reflections, the summary, and the research conclusion.

Project Results

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore the leadership strategies that some nonprofit organization (NPO) leaders use to motivate employees. The targeted population for this case study consisted of five leaders of an NPO in Ethiopia, who have been employees of the nonprofit and had been in a management position for a minimum of 5 years, who implemented successful leadership strategies to motivate employees. Bakhashwain and Javed (2021) recognized human resources as one of the most pivotal assets of an organization, defining its success and failure. Leaders who implement effective strategies to improve employee motivation improve organizational productivity and help develop economically stable and sustainable communities (Olusadum & Anulika, 2018). Five participants provided their personal, real-life experiences with strategies used to motivate employees in their organization. The overarching question that guided this case study was: What leadership strategies do NPO

leaders use to motivate employees? The conceptual framework for this research was the self-determination theory (see Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Vroom's expectancy theory (see Vroom, 1964). Upon completion of data collection and verification, I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code the data and analyze emerging themes. Five themes emerged: (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational policy framework and procedure, (c) measuring effectiveness of motivational strategy, (d) alignment with mission and values, and (e) promoting employee participation and autonomy. The five themes are aligned with the literature and the conceptual framework of this case study. The findings confirmed and extended the knowledge of the strategies leaders of NPO organizations use to motivate employees in the nonprofit sector.

Theme 1: Leadership Behavior

Leadership behavior emerged as a critical factor that the five leaders cited as an example of leader behavior that provides motivation to employees, especially in the nonprofit sector. Badubi (2017) and Sahito and Vaisanen (2017) supported the theme on leadership behavior as aligning with the process theories of motivation, including Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), which explained the motivational mechanisms by way of changes in the process of satisfying human needs and how human behavior is encouraged, directed, and maintained with respect to desired goals. The subthemes or leader behaviors that provided employee motivation included effective two-way communication, transparency and reinforcing accountability, leading by example, building trust and confidence, team building and networking, and relationship building (with supervisor). Sahito and Vaisanen (2017) viewed motivation as a complex behavior

that varies over time and under different conditions, statuses, or circumstances. Tanno and Banner (2018) observed that employees viewed motivational behaviors as the ability to empower others. Leaders should adopt different behaviors at different times to empower and motivate different and diverse employees.

Effective Communication

Effective communication contributes to strong interpersonal relationships and fosters respect between leaders and employees, thereby boosting employee motivation. Klopotan et al. (2018) acknowledged effective communication and personnel management as the highest parameters affecting a better working environment, employee motivation, and business performance in a diverse workforce. Rožman et al. (2017) identified good interpersonal relationships in the workplace and respect among employees as strategies that motivate older employees in the workplace. Each of the five participants confirmed the importance of effective two-way open communication as a leadership behavior to motivate employees. For instance, P1 stated, “Good communication goes a long way in maintaining the interest of staff in the work they are doing for the organization.” All five participants, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 emphasized the importance of sharing information with staff, and the need for good communication skills for the manager to be able to communicate a common vision and desired results through holding frequent meetings, frequent training, frequent review meetings, various capacity building sessions and promoting free and open communication. P2, P3 and P4, in agreement with P1, reported communication skills and consistent communication as the second most effective strategy towards motivating employees. According to P4, “good

communication through the different forums promotes greater interactions” and creates an interface with the staff “for smooth communications which improves employee motivation and helps staff adjust to the changing context.” This kind of open communication encourages greater employee participation and can increase employee motivation.

In the HR Policy and Procedural Manual (HRPM), under the section on the Disciplinary and Grievance procedure, the policy states, “Open communication between staff and management is used as a strategy to maintain organizational peace and stability.” In the staff training and development manual, there was a statement encouraging application of time and resources to nurture leadership potential, improve competencies, commitment to objectives, communication, and problem-solving skills, and motivate staff. Furthermore, in the organizational annual performance report for 2019, one of the stated capacity constraints was the lack of basic infrastructure, limiting communication. Leaders should keep good open communication and an enabling environment to keep their employees motivated.

Transparency and Reinforcing Accountability

P3 brought in the need for transparency and reinforcing accountability when dealing with organizational partners, the communities, as well as the beneficiaries. P4 reported that management demonstrated transparency in how resources are managed and utilized toward the original purpose and objective. P3 reported, “communicating openly and transparently on performance feedback given through informal ways such as during tea break, lunch break, or during field trips can also be a good motivational strategy” and

“using the opportunity to informally give feedback as well as take feedback from staff.”

“During both the formal and informal communication platforms, the leader listens carefully to the employee and solicits their inputs and opinions on how the challenges faced by the organization would best be resolved.” P3 and P4 also reported the use of a formal complaint mechanism to communicate a complaint if a member of staff is aggrieved, with P4 further explaining how the executive director communicates with every staff member, regardless of their status or rank within the organization. Such a strategy is motivational to staff. Through open communication and the use of formal organizational procedures and systems, corrective measures are taken on all reported complaints and grievances. P4 further posited that what is expected of a leader is tolerance and listening to people, so they can really talk about what they want and discuss their perspectives on issues and how they really feel about how things are done. P4 further summarized by saying the role of leadership is to have a big ear, to listen carefully to input from staff, distill the information, and make the final decision, while communicating back on the rationale for the decision as a sign of respect to the employee. Openness and transparency are one of the motivation strategies.

Effective communication and feedback emerged from the literature as central nonfinancial motivational strategies that strengthen transparency, reinforce accountability, and enhance employee motivation. According to Cimrmanová and Hubinková (2016), feedback is one of the manager’s main communication tools, which the manager can use to lead their team to the openness of an effective two-way communication between the leader and the subordinates, and clarify accountabilities.

Nikolić et al. (2020) confirmed how regular feedback could encourage good relations between management and employees, motivating them to do their best. Thibault-Landry et al.(2020) explored the motivational impact of positive performance feedback and that of cash rewards and found that positive performance feedback was a motivator, that enhanced intrinsic motivation, while on the contrary, monetary rewards had a negative impact as individuals focused on the external financial gain to be made by engaging in the activity instead of participating in the activity for its own sake and enjoyment, thus leading them to experience greater extrinsic motivation and lower intrinsic motivation. Goldman and Brann (2016) confirmed the importance of effective communication behaviors towards fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Cimrmannová and Hubinková, in agreement with Kristina (2016), confirmed the significance of communication and other nonfinancial motivational strategies in increasing employee satisfaction in the nonprofit sector. Helbling (2018) supported effective communication as the most effective strategy to motivate employees. By practicing open dialogue with their followers, leaders can eliminate misunderstandings and unnecessary assumptions from their followers.

The HR Policy, under the subsection on Values, highlights “Transparency,” “Accountability,” People-centeredness, Gender sensitivity, Equity, and pluralism as the five core values of the organization. Furthermore, under the section on Objectives of the HR Manual, three objectives refer to transparency and fairness: (a) to ensure staff development and personnel policies are managed in a consistent, transparent, equitable and effective manner; (b) to provide fair and equal opportunities to all staff; and (c)

mechanisms in place for grievance management. In addition, under the employment section of the same HR Manual, the organization promotes nondiscrimination. By providing equal opportunity to all, promoting performance, and providing mechanisms to air grievances, leaders keep employees motivated. The policy transparently lays down a clear grievance procedure in place, enabling staff to raise their grievances in respect to decisions taken on them, including the use of a Grievance Committee. All these procedures promote open communication, transparency, and accountability between supervisor and supervisee and thereby increase employee motivation. The participants reported transparent utilization of organizational resources as a source of motivation. Details of fund utilization and financial performance using IPSAS are publicly shared in the 2019 annual report. The information in the HR Policy Manual, and the 2019 Annual Report supports the subtheme on “transparency and accountability” as reported by the participants.

Leading by Example

Each time the leaders spoke about a desired behavior, they shared examples of how and what they were doing to demonstrate the desired behavior. P1 responded “I myself, beginning of the year, as a leader, I take up different roles which are not necessarily my roles as the Director of the organization”. In the absence of specific technical staff for doing that task, when the few available staff are overwhelmed, P1 shared that he takes on several tasks to support his employees, and thereby demonstrating leading by example:

When reporting on project progress, I work on detailed reporting of projects when project officers are overwhelmed with meeting the deadlines of different donors, working on different reports at the same time. They need to be supported, and, in that case, I may work as a project officer and different people do the same.

In agreement with P1, in addition to leading by doing, P2 demonstrated the power of motivating employees through leading by doing and promoting team spirit by working on tasks together with the supervisees, which in turn motivates subordinates to follow the leader. P2 stated, “If you are a leader, you must be a role model for your staff.” Furthermore, P4 encouraged openness and transparency with employees. On leading by example, P4 stated, “management conducts field visits with their teams and discusses all the administrative and project challenges and progress with all the staff, including program, administrative, and support staff. Leaders who encourage openness demonstrate transparency and help to build trust. In discussing progress and challenges, P4 stated leaders should also lead by example in addressing negative behaviors amongst employees, citing, as an example, issuing written warning letters to staff who demonstrate unwelcome behaviors such as embezzlement of resources. Leaders who lead by example as a strategy to motivate employees should not only reinforce positive behaviors, but also reprimand negative behaviors, as a strategy to motivate employees. Unless the leader is firm in correcting such negative behaviors, other staff may be demotivated if people who demonstrate bad behaviors that may jeopardize the reputation of the organization go unpunished. By consistently modelling and demonstrating positive behaviors while addressing negative behaviors, leaders motivate employees.

Existing literature strongly supports leading by example as a powerful motivational strategy through which leaders model expected behaviors, foster trust, and enhance employee satisfaction and performance. Jacques et al. (2015) demonstrated that leaders motivate employees by consistently modeling behaviors that create positive work experiences, which in turn strengthen employee self-confidence. Effective leaders focus on nurturing healthy, trustworthy relationships with their employees and modeling desired workplace behaviors to maintain motivation. Coulson-Thomas (2014) noted that leaders who provide appropriate support to help employees understand expected behaviors, while also demonstrating those behaviors themselves, are more likely to achieve desired social change regardless of organizational culture. Leaders who exemplify desired behaviors also contribute to employee job satisfaction, which positively influences performance (Bouckennooghe et al., 2015; Donia et al., 2016; Octaviannand et al., 2017). The subtheme of leading by example, although identified by P1, P2, and P4, was not included in the policy manual or in any other documents reviewed.

Team Building and Networking

P4 reported that leaders with strong team-building skills can motivate employees by promoting teamwork that supports the organizational mission. P4 noted that bringing people together to work as a team can be challenging for management. In agreement with P4, P5 linked team building to staff retreats, during which staff are encouraged to interact, participate actively, and speak freely, offering feedback to management. Such practices create team spirit and encourage transparency, which are important not only for

motivating employees but also for achieving organizational objectives. Helbling (2018) demonstrated that leaders who bring employees together help them feel more motivated to assist individuals and teams with whom they share trust, personal connection, and a sense of accountability. P1 emphasized that “the leader should be active and proactive in engaging with other like-minded organizations, consulting with donors and government, sharing experiences, lessons learned, and potentially sharing resources such as human resources.”

By networking with others and sharing experiences about how they motivate employees, leaders can learn effective strategies applicable within the nonprofit sector. Referring to funding partners, P3 reported, “so, we try to make our partners understand the problem that we have, the importance of capacity building and motivating employees.” Studying the nonprofit sector and citing the Latin proverb “a good reputation is better than money,” Cimrmanová and Hubinková (2016) emphasized the importance of leaders’ behaviors in shaping corporate identity and image, which in turn influence the organization’s external attractiveness. In the staff training and development manual, team building is identified as one of the motivational processes that promote staff development. The manual states that Organization X recognizes staff commitment, effort, skills, knowledge, attitudes, expertise, and motivation as essential to achieving the organization’s community-based development projects. By recognizing that its primary resource is its human capital, Organization X values building and motivating teams. The staff development policy states that its aim is to maximize human resource potential and organizational effectiveness, cultivate team spirit, develop and share common values, and

strengthen staff commitment to the organization's vision and mission. Processes used to promote staff development include team building, coaching and counseling, participatory management, and shared decision-making.

Relationship with Supervisor

All five participants (P1–P5) reported the importance of leaders establishing strong relationships with their supervisees and colleagues. According to P1, “an individual employee sometimes sees his or her relationship with the organization through the lens of his or her relationship with the immediate supervisor, which may be positive or negative depending on the circumstances.” P2 similarly noted that “staff get motivated by working as a team with their own supervisor and other colleagues,” suggesting that leaders who model team spirit inspire employees to do the same. P3 added that “staff get motivated when they receive support from their leaders in solving the problems they face when doing their work.” P4 emphasized the need for a transparent and supportive relationship between leaders and employees, describing how such relationships motivated them to deliver expected results even when work extended beyond normal duties. P4 and P5 also stressed the importance of leaders being open, granting autonomy, and providing flexible working hours with clear performance targets. They noted that leaders should not focus solely on late arrivals but instead allow employees to learn from failures when doing so contributes to the achievement of organizational goals. According to P5, “the culture of organization X does not follow strict working hours; rather, the focus is on achieving deliverables in a flexible manner.” Leaders who allow flexibility in the work environment increase employee autonomy and self-determination. However, P5

cautioned that “flexibility without accountability and clear obligations” can demotivate staff who work diligently while observing others absent for extended periods without consequences.

The subtheme of strong leader, supervisee relationships and flexible working conditions aligns with previous research emphasizing the need for positive relationships between leaders and employees. Kolodinsky et al. (2017) found a significant effect of leadership support on worker engagement among millennials. Older employees reported greater satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, work conditions, working hours, the distribution of work regulations, and opportunities for self-regulation (Rožman et al., 2017). Park and Kang (2017) also identified flexible working hours as a key motivational factor. Allowing flexibility in the workplace, such as not strictly enforcing start times, aligns with Tadić et al. (2015), who observed that hindrance demands: such as redundant formal rules, excessive bureaucracy, role ambiguity, and role conflict, can demotivate employees. To maintain motivation, leaders should work to reduce unnecessary formal rules and minimize bureaucratic barriers and role ambiguity.

The HR Manual reinforces these findings. One of its stated objectives is to create a harmonious working relationship and a conducive working atmosphere to maintain a satisfied, self-regulated, and motivated workforce. Another objective is to clearly identify the rights and obligations of staff. The HR Policy affirms the importance of leaders fostering strong relationships with supervisees and colleagues, and of ensuring that roles, accountabilities, and obligations are clearly understood, consistent with what all five participants (P1–P5) reported. The organization’s emphasis on maintaining a competitive

edge through continuous learning and innovation is further highlighted in the “Lessons Learned” section of the 2019 Annual Report.

Theme 2: Organizational Policy Framework and Procedure

Organizational policy framework and procedure emerged as the second theme, with subthemes including types of material rewards, financial resource limitations, recognition of results, recruitment, induction and retention, and staff capacity development as critical aspects of organizational success in motivating employees.

Material Rewards

All participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) emphasized the importance of extrinsic material rewards, including salaries, periodic salary reviews, and benefit packages, noting that staff typically expect such compensation to support their livelihood. P1 explained that employees require a balance between monetary incentives and non-monetary forms of motivation, while also acknowledging that material resources are not the only significant motivational factor. Consistent with P1’s perspective, P2 and P3 elaborated that material incentives beyond base salary include nontaxable allowances such as bonuses, per diems, medical insurance, life indemnity insurance, hardship allowances, mobile communication allowances, transportation allowances, education support, and promotional or appreciation letters recognizing achievements.

P4 further noted that “while some staff may be motivated by salary, which is slightly better than that of government, this may not be the most effective.” Klopota et al. (2018) similarly found that direct financial rewards are no longer the most essential motivator for sustaining employee engagement. Likewise, Helbling (2018) highlighted

the limited effectiveness of monetary or material incentives, arguing that motivational policies grounded in traditional frameworks—such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—often lead leaders to rely on extrinsic, bureaucratic tools like merit bonuses to secure compliance, while overlooking the reality that most human behavior is shaped by emotional rationalization. Although all participants acknowledged the availability of several extrinsic monetary incentives detailed in the HRPM and recognized the organization’s efforts to safeguard staff well-being and meet its obligations under HR policy, they emphasized that extrinsic incentives are necessary but regard intrinsic motivational strategies as more effective.

Financial Resource Limitations

Financial constraints emerged as a major challenge influencing how leaders understood and addressed employee motivation in Organization X. All participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) noted that despite an organizational policy mandating annual salary increases to account for market inflation, Organization X has lacked the financial resources to implement meaningful adjustments. P1 explained that donors rarely allocate funding for strategic development, institutional capacity building, staff capacity development, or staff motivation. Supporting this view, P2 stated that donors often do not recognize the value of funding capacity-building initiatives or employee-motivation activities. P2 further observed that “despite the low wages, most staff stay for over 10 years or even over 15 years with our organization as they like the stability of our organization.”

The continued retention of employees despite relatively low salaries suggests that

staff may be motivated more by intrinsic than extrinsic factors. This interpretation aligns with self-determination theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological drivers of motivation, as well as Vroom's expectancy theory, which suggests that employees remain committed when they believe their efforts will lead to valued outcomes beyond financial compensation. Overall, leaders' perspectives illustrate how financial limitations restrict traditional extrinsic motivational strategies, thereby increasing reliance on intrinsic drivers and non-financial conditions to sustain employee commitment.

Compensation and rewards also emerged as a related subtheme, reflecting how leaders interpret and respond to motivational needs within resource-constrained environments. This subtheme aligns with research by Manganelli et al. (2018), who found that leaders can support employees' psychological needs through compensation practices. All five leaders had been with Organization X for more than five years, a trend consistent with findings by Bassous (2015) and Rožman et al. (2017), who reported that employees with longer tenure often exhibit higher levels of motivation and are less influenced by monetary incentives. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how financial limitations intersect with broader motivational processes, providing a foundation for examining additional non-financial factors that shape employee commitment in Organization X.

Giving Recognition for Results

P2 and P3 reported providing recognition to staff for achieved results as a key strategy to enhance employee motivation. This subtheme aligns with previous research

indicating that leaders can fulfill employees' psychological needs through compensation and recognition practices (Manganelli et al., 2018). Consistent with these findings, the organization's *Staff Training and Development Manual* states that the organization "recognizes the commitment of staff and effort in general, and their skills, knowledge, attitudes, expertise and motivation in particular as the avenue through which community-based development projects can be achieved." This organizational statement reinforces the subtheme by demonstrating the institution's formal commitment to acknowledging staff contributions as an integral component of motivating employees.

Recruitment, Induction and Retention Strategy

Effective recruitment and structured induction processes emerged as key strategies used by Organization X to motivate, retain, and align employees with organizational values and expectations. P1 and P3 reported that one of the primary strategies for sustaining employee motivation is ensuring the recruitment of the "right person" from the outset—specifically individuals with the appropriate experience, qualifications, attitude, and alignment with the organization's value system and working culture. P1 and P2 added that once employees join the organization, they undergo a structured induction process that orients them to the organization's vision, mission, goals, values, methodologies, and working relationships.

These practices align with Brolis (2018), who argued that hiring individuals who are intrinsically motivated by an organization's mission and who share its values enhances long-term engagement. Similarly, Bakhashwain and Javed (2021) found that employee underperformance and dissatisfaction frequently arise from ineffective

recruitment and selection practices.

Organization X's *Human Resource Policy Manual* (HRPM) formally reinforces these approaches. The HRPM outlines detailed procedures for recruitment, selection, and appointment and mandates comprehensive induction and orientation for all new or promoted staff. It specifies that employees must receive both general orientation and job-specific induction to integrate them into organizational values, objectives, policies, and procedures. The alignment between participant perspectives and HRPM provisions indicates that Organization X places strong emphasis on recruiting individuals who fit its organizational culture and ensuring they receive structured onboarding.

These practices support employee motivation by fostering early clarity, value alignment, and organizational commitment. The literature further supported this approach: recruiting individuals who are a strong organizational fit reduces performance challenges and enhances intrinsic motivation, while well-designed induction processes strengthen employees' capacity to integrate successfully and remain engaged over time. Taken together, these findings suggest that recruitment and induction processes play a central role in supporting employee motivation and retention in Organization X, forming an essential component of the organization's broader human resource and motivational strategy.

Staff Capacity Development Strategy

Staff capacity development emerged as a central motivational strategy in Organization X, with leaders emphasizing training, skill building, and career progression as essential for enhancing employee motivation and performance. P1 identified career

development opportunities as one of the organization's most effective motivational strategies. P3 highlighted the importance of empowering employees, providing guidance, and collaborating to strengthen performance, while P4 emphasized the need for organizations to consistently apply new perspectives to build staff capacity. P3 also noted that "learning by doing" is particularly effective. These perspectives align with Cook and Artino (2016), who identified competence and value attributions as core motivational drivers across major theoretical frameworks.

Organizational documents supported these findings. The *Human Resource Policy Manual* (HRPM) states that Organization X recognizes the importance of investing in staff skills, knowledge, attitudes, expertise, and motivation to ensure effective implementation of community-based development projects. The HRPM emphasizes holding employees accountable for their responsibilities while supporting them to self-assess their developmental needs and meet performance expectations for both current and future roles.

The *Staff Training and Development Manual* further elaborates on: (a) the shared responsibilities of leaders and employees in supporting staff development; (b) the belief that strengthening staff skills and knowledge enhances individual and organizational performance; and (c) the requirement that staff training align with the organization's strategic goals and objectives. The manual identifies on-the-job training as the organization's most frequently used method, reflecting the belief that employees learn most effectively through hands-on experience under the guidance of experienced colleagues or supervisors. In addition, the staff development policy aims to: (a) develop

and retain competent and motivated staff; (b) build organizational capacity to improve project impact; (c) maximize human resource potential and organizational effectiveness; (d) foster team spirit and shared values; and (e) strengthen staff commitment to the organization's vision and mission. Professional development is further supported by provisions in the HRPM's leave administration section, which entitles employees pursuing examinations to 10 days of examination leave per year.

Taken together, participant perspectives and organizational policies indicated that Organization X views staff development as both a motivational strategy and a mechanism for strengthening organizational effectiveness. Opportunities for skills enhancement, continuous learning, and career advancement contribute to employees' sense of competence, an essential component in contemporary motivation theories. On-the-job learning, accountability structures, and supportive guidance reinforce employees' capacity to perform effectively while enhancing intrinsic motivation through mastery, growth, and alignment with organizational values. Overall, staff development serves as a foundational element of the organization's broader human resources and motivational strategy.

Theme 3: Measuring Effectiveness of Motivational Strategy

When asked how they measure the effectiveness of the strategies they use to motivate employees, none of the five leaders were able to identify a formal mechanism for doing so. None of the reviewed organizational documents included procedures or indicators for assessing the effectiveness of motivational strategies. Likewise, no relevant literature aligned with or supported this subtheme, reinforcing the challenge identified by

participants regarding the difficulty of measuring motivational effectiveness. As P4 explained, “I do not know how to articulate that as an indicator.” Similarly, P1 acknowledged that leaders face challenges in formally assessing their motivational strategies, noting that the organization lacks established instruments, strategies, or methodologies to do so. Instead, effectiveness is gauged through informal approaches: “We measure effectiveness of our motivational strategies through informal means such as interaction with colleagues, for example, through meetings, visiting staff at their work areas, and allowing staff to air their concerns either formally or informally,” P1 stated.

In agreement, P2 described the organization’s assessment practices as largely qualitative: “Sometimes measurement of how effective the motivational strategies are [is] a qualitative one.” P1 further explained that identifying the most effective strategy is difficult because “bits and pieces of the different strategies reinforce each other and if they are provided together, they, could impact potentially.” According to P1, the perceived effectiveness of different motivational strategies varies among employees: “To some individuals material things such as salary increase are more important than the social things, for instance such as good communication or opportunity for career progression.” P1 added that the “need for survival makes material incentives seem more important, as people have different financial obligations to meet to enjoy a decent life.”

Given the absence of literature supporting this subtheme and the lack of formal assessment mechanisms within the organization, future research on employee motivation, particularly within nonprofit contexts, should explore methods for systematically measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies. Such research could contribute to

the development of evidence-based tools that help organizations evaluate and strengthen their motivational practices.

Theme 4: Alignment with Mission and Values

The fourth theme identified in relation to strategies used to motivate employees was alignment with mission and organizational values. All five participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) agreed that leaders use the induction process to orient new staff to the organization's mission, set clear objectives, and emphasize the impact the organization has on the lives of ordinary people. According to P1, an understanding of the mission and the organization's broader contribution to humanity serves as a source of sustainable motivation for many staff. P3, P4, and P5 further highlighted the importance of setting clear objectives and goals to cultivate a shared vision and common understanding among employees. Participants also noted that many staff remain with the organization despite low wages because they are motivated by their contribution to the community and the country, often serving in remote areas and reaching highly vulnerable populations. As P4 stated, "one thing to remember is leadership must focus on the objectives of the organization and make the Mission the central point of reflection in addressing any issue while striving to satisfy the staff interest as well as the organization's mandate."

Effective communication enables leaders to articulate a compelling vision and clear objectives, supporting employees in aligning their personal sense of purpose with the organization's mission. Renard and Snelgar (2018), consistent with Bassous (2015), emphasized that employees in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) tend to be intrinsically motivated by altruistic values, a personal connection to their work, and a desire to make a

meaningful contribution. By the nature of the nonprofit sector, many employees choose to work in NPOs for reasons beyond monetary gain. Cimrmannová and Hubinková (2016) attributed the continued commitment of nonprofit employees, despite funding challenges and uncertainty, to leadership strategies that foster a creative, credible, and autonomous working environment. Leaders who promote freedom, creativity, and value alignment are therefore more likely to support sustained motivation.

Several researchers have confirmed that leaders who communicate a compelling vision, set clear expectations, speak optimistically about the future, and inspire confidence in their followers can enhance employee engagement and commitment (Berson et al., 2015; Bronkhorst et al., 2015; Horn et al., 2015). Renard and Snelgar (2018), using factor analysis, demonstrated that intrinsic motivation factors, such as personal connection to one's work, desire to make a difference, and desire to perform, correlate positively with work engagement and salary satisfaction, and negatively with intention to quit. These findings underscore the value of intrinsic motivational strategies within the nonprofit sector, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Organizational documents further support this theme. In the *Human Resources Policy and Procedural Manual*, the Vision statement affirms that Organization X “envisions a society in which poverty is eradicated, and people lead a dignified life in an enabling environment.” The policy states that the organization's programs aim to achieve food security and sustainable livelihoods at the grassroots level by “promoting self-development initiatives of vulnerable rural communities” and “mobilizing both local and external resources towards strengthening the capacity of communities for self-reliance.”

This information corroborates participant accounts that alignment with the organizational mission and values is used as a motivational strategy.

During staff orientation and induction, the organization's mission, vision, values, and objectives are emphasized to ensure that incoming staff align with the organization's core principles. When there is harmony between personal values and organizational values, this alignment can become a source of long-term and sustainable motivation. Such value congruence not only strengthens commitment but also enhances employees' sense of purpose and belonging within the organization. Ultimately, the consistency between individual motivations and organizational ideals contributes to higher levels of engagement, dedication, and retention.

Theme 5: Promoting Employee Participation and Autonomy

Promoting employee participation and autonomy emerged as a critical strategy used by leaders of nonprofit organizations to motivate employees. P1 reported that “through promoting employee participation, middle-level leaders such as field coordinators have been able to fundraise innovatively on their own to invest in implementing employee motivational strategies to keep the officers motivated and the field offices operating.” Staff appear to value autonomy more than higher salaries. P1, P2, and P5 explained that the annual staff retreats provide an opportunity for employees to gather in a relaxed and informal setting to discuss their successes and challenges. This setting promotes greater participation, as staff feel free to raise issues of concern and contribute to identifying ways to address challenges.

P3 added that “one strategy to keep staff motivated is to make the team own the

work or the activities they do, encouraging them to take responsibility and ownership of the work they do.” Supporting this view, P5 stated that employees feel encouraged when targets are achieved. P3 and P5 also noted that the annual performance appraisal system serves as a motivational tool, as staff participate in evaluating their own plans in consultation with their immediate supervisors. Objective feedback from supervisors helps identify areas for improvement. Engelbrecht et al. (2014) described the leader–follower relationship established through effective performance appraisal as an important strategy for increasing employee competence.

According to P3, although various strategies can be effective, the most effective motivational approach is giving staff responsibility and ownership of their work without interference, embarrassment, excessive monitoring, or micromanagement. In promoting participation and staff motivation, P5 also emphasized the importance of trust.

I trust my employees without frequently monitoring them, they deliver their work and produce financial reports on time. Sometimes I give them permission to submit financial reports directly to donors because I trust them. This does not mean I overlook my responsibility as a leader, but I delegate and build confidence. This boosts their confidence as well as motivation and enhances their participation in decision making processes.

Zareen et al. (2015) observed that workforce members demonstrated elevated levels of motivation when they were involved in organizational processes, allowed to make decisions, and able to witness the positive outcomes of those decisions. In agreement with this finding, G. Thompson and Glasø (2015) and Shuck et al. (2018)

confirmed that leaders who create environments that promote greater employee participation help increase employee competence, sustain motivation, and enhance overall performance. More recent literature supports the use of employee participation as a motivational strategy. Arslan and Demir (2020) found that involvement in decision-making processes increases intrinsic motivation, which in turn substantially improves employee performance.

Organizational documents also affirmed the importance of employee participation and autonomy. In the *Human Resources Policy*, one of the stated objectives is to create a sense of both collective and individual responsibility. The policy underscores the importance of empowering staff and granting them autonomy to take responsibility for their work while contributing to collective organizational goals. This aligns with Theme 5, *Promoting Employee Participation and Autonomy*, as identified in the participant interviews.

Additionally, the *Performance Management Manual* provides guidance on annual performance planning and evaluation, including procedures under the strategic management section. Although the organization is obligated to award performance-based salary adjustments, participants reported that only annual inflationary adjustments have been made due to limited financial resources. According to participants, organizational leadership has not implemented performance-based increases due to these financial constraints.

The 2019 Annual Performance Report highlighted several challenges facing the organization: (a) diminishing funds, (b) efforts to strengthen relationships with local

government to ensure organizational viability and network participation, (c) shifting donor attitudes and an unpredictable funding environment, and (d) concerns about organizational sustainability due to limited self-financing capacity. These challenges contextualize the organization's limited ability to fully implement performance-based incentive structures while reinforcing the importance of non-financial strategies, such as participation and autonomy, in sustaining employee motivation.

Relevance to Scholarship

After discussing the five themes that emerged from the data analysis: (a) leadership behavior, (b) organizational policy framework and procedures, (c) measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies, (d) alignment with mission and values, and (e) promoting employee participation and autonomy, in the section below, I assessed the alignment of each theme with the existing literature and the conceptual framework guiding this case study. I also examined the relevance of the case study findings to current scholarship and explained how the results extend knowledge regarding the strategies leaders of nonprofit organizations use to motivate employees within the nonprofit sector.

Theme 1: Leadership Behavior

The review of new literature and the organization's reports confirmed that the leadership behavior theme identified by the research participants influences employee motivation. Leadership behavior can be considered part of an organization's human intellectual capital. Given that leadership knowledge, skills, experience, and wisdom contribute to human capital and shape leadership behaviors, Petrova and Pereira (2024)

recognized human capital as the organization's most valuable asset and a source of creativity and innovation. This first theme aligns with process theories of motivation, including self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which accounts for emotional rationalization by linking purpose and gratification with intrinsic motivation necessary for sustainable results, employee well-being, and creativity. It also aligns with Vroom's expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), which explains motivational mechanisms through the process of satisfying human needs and clarifies how behavior is encouraged, directed, and sustained toward desired goals (Badubi, 2017; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2017). By considering inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs, self-determination theory provides a useful lens for understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. McAnally and Hagger (2024) demonstrated that when leaders satisfy employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, workers exhibit high-quality motivation and improved well-being; conversely, when leaders fail to meet these psychological needs, employees experience diminished motivation and greater ill-being. Reviewing recent literature through the lens of expectancy theory, Bakri and Al Mazrouei (2023) confirmed a positive and significant relationship between leadership behavior styles and employee motivation. Practicing effective communication is one strategy that enables leaders to share a compelling vision and sustain employee interest in their work.

Effective communication and leading by example are critical leadership strategies that enhance employee motivation and organizational performance. Within the subtheme of effective communication, and drawing on self-determination theory, Yu et al. (2025)

found that paradoxical leadership behaviors foster psychological safety, encouraging employees to offer constructive suggestions and identify operational inefficiencies. This, in turn, improves organizational effectiveness while simultaneously meeting employees' individual needs. Similarly, Helbling (2018) emphasized that creating space for employees to express themselves freely and remain engaged is among the most powerful strategies for sustaining motivation.

Regarding the subtheme of leading by example, leaders must develop technical expertise in addition to managerial skills to effectively guide their teams. As P2 noted, "having adequate technical skills, in addition to managerial and leadership skills, is a motivational factor for a leader and his supervisees." These findings suggest that leaders who combine technical competence with managerial acumen and who actively seek feedback foster an environment of trust and empowerment. Psychological safety and open communication not only enhance innovation and resilience but also enable employees to develop a paradox mindset for navigating workplace tensions. This dual emphasis on technical and interpersonal skills positions leaders to model desired behaviors, strengthen credibility, and motivate teams. As Deci and Ryan (2017) and Edmondson and Lei (2014) explain, organizations that encourage open communication and ongoing leadership development enhance employee engagement and support organizational adaptability. Therefore, organizations should institutionalize policies that promote open dialogue and continuous skill development among leaders.

Theme 2: Organizational Policy Framework and Procedure

The review of the literature confirmed the second theme on organizational policy frameworks by identifying reward systems, recognition for results, clear recruitment and retention strategies, and staff development as key policy components that contribute to employee motivation. Kuvaas et al. (2017) recognized several strategies leaders can use within organizational policy to motivate employees, including intrinsic factors such as achievement, recognition, and personal growth, as well as extrinsic factors such as compensation, working conditions, and interpersonal relations. These factors were proposed to directly influence productivity. Kuvaas argued that rewards highly contingent on employee performance are more effective than low-contingency rewards such as uniform annual salary increments. In resource-constrained settings, leaders who emphasize intrinsic motivational factors are more likely to sustain employee motivation.

Most nonprofit organizations operate with limited budgets, making monetary incentives an unsustainable approach to long-term employee motivation. Cimrmannová and Hubinková (2016) and Maurer (2016) identified lack of funding as a major challenge affecting leaders of NPOs and undermining organizational sustainability. Bassous (2015) similarly reported that nonprofit workers often earn less and work more than their counterparts in the private sector, yet many choose nonprofit work because it allows them to pursue deeply rooted values aligned with organizational missions. Given these realities, nonprofit leaders must prioritize nonfinancial incentives to ensure long-term employee motivation. Bassous (2015) found a significant positive relationship between worker motivation and nonmonetary incentives, leadership style, and organizational

culture, while finding no significant relationship between motivation and monetary incentives. Instead of focusing on short-term task-completion rewards, leaders should set clear objectives, assign responsibilities, and communicate expectations to ensure desired outcomes (Martin, 2015; Rawung et al., 2015). Leaders who strengthen intrinsic motivational strategies avoid the limitations associated with extrinsic approaches and are more likely to sustain employee motivation.

According to Rawung et al. (2015), leader–follower relationships based solely on reward or punishment do not foster meaningful engagement. The history of self-determination theory traces back to early research by Deci, demonstrating that extrinsic rewards, such as monetary payments, can undermine intrinsic motivation for the rewarded activity (DeRobertis & Bland, 2018). Vroom’s expectancy theory also predicts that individuals engage in behaviors they believe will lead to valued future outcomes, provided they perceive themselves as capable of performing those behaviors. Leaders must therefore ensure employees understand desired organizational outcomes. Nonprofit leaders who invest in detailed recruitment, selection, and induction processes, ensuring the right candidate is placed in the right role at the right time, can enhance motivation and improve organizational competitiveness.

Helbling (2018) reported that over 70% of employees experience disengagement daily, sometimes to the point of contemplating leaving their job; conversely, highly engaged employees are 38% more likely to exhibit above-average productivity. If organizational results are the goal, highly motivated and engaged employees represent essential human capital. Despite financial constraints, leaders should prioritize staff

development after recruiting and inducting qualified personnel. Hasso and Akbay (2020) supported the importance of developmental investments by demonstrating that extrinsic factors such as education, job status, training and development, justice, and job security positively influence motivation. Leaders should therefore ensure that these factors are integrated into organizational policies as a strategy to sustain motivation. Leaders who develop and implement strong organizational policies and operational procedures help create working conditions that foster employee motivation. According to Grabowski et al. (2021), contextual factors, including working conditions, pay, organizational structure, job design, task characteristics, flexibility, managerial oversight, and organizational climate, directly influence intrinsic motivation and contribute to creative performance.

Theme 3: Measuring Effectiveness of Motivational Strategy

When asked how they measure the effectiveness of the strategies used to motivate employees, none of the five leaders were able to identify a formal method for doing so. Participants indicated that the effectiveness of motivational strategies is assessed informally, primarily through interactions with colleagues. P1 explained that the need for survival makes extrinsic material rewards, such as salary increases, seem more important than intrinsic rewards such as recognition, personal growth, or opportunities for career progression. According to P1, “monetary compensation seemed more important, as people have different financial obligations to meet to enjoy a decent life.” In contrast, citing transparency, strong relationships, and safeguarding resources in the interest of the organization, P4 stated clearly that, in his view, the three most effective motivational factors are intrinsic factors.

Rayburn et al. (2018) reported that humans have intrinsic motivational tendencies, which require supportive conditions to be sustained. However, no literature was found that directly supports or aligns with the theme of measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies. This gap reflects the challenges reported by participants, who described significant difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of the strategies they use to motivate staff. Furthermore, none of the organizational documents reviewed included mechanisms for measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies. Given this gap, future research on employee motivation could explore approaches for systematically measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies within the nonprofit sector.

Theme 4: Alignment with Mission and Values

The primary goal of strategic leaders is to ensure the long-term sustainability of an organization by aligning its vision with core objectives and motivating employees to work toward that vision. Strategic leadership involves creating a compelling vision and inspiring employees to embrace it (Kebede et al., 2024). The theme on alignment with organizational mission and values is consistent with one of the core propositions of self-determination theory, which asserts that human behavior is driven by a sense of agency and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Understanding how strategic leadership fosters intrinsic motivation provides a foundation for exploring how these motivational processes translate into broader organizational behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behavior.

Organ (1997) introduced the concept of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), defining it as voluntary and discretionary actions that are not formally rewarded

but enhance organizational functioning. Sitepu and Anindita (2025) found that leadership behavior significantly influences employee motivation, which in turn fosters OCB, including commitment and job satisfaction. The presence of organizational citizenship behavior encourages employees to engage in extra-role activities such as collaboration and problem-solving, which are essential for fulfilling the organizational mission. These findings underscore the interdependence between strategic leadership, employee motivation, and OCB.

Leaders who articulate a clear vision and cultivate intrinsic motivation create the conditions necessary for OCB to develop. When OCB is present, organizational cohesion is strengthened, and resource mobilization, communication, and constructive interaction are enhanced, factors that are critical to achieving strategic goals. Without these elements, organizations struggle to realize their vision, as motivation and morale are foundational to efficiency and adaptability. Therefore, organizational leaders should prioritize leadership development programs that emphasize vision-setting, motivational strategies, and the cultivation of organizational citizenship behavior. By doing so, leaders can inspire employees to exceed formal role requirements, enhance service quality, and support long-term organizational success (Kebede et al., 2024; Organ, 1997). Without these factors in place, achieving the desired organizational vision becomes unlikely.

Theme 5: Promoting Employee Participation and Autonomy

Leaders who demonstrate transparency, uphold high standards of accountability, communicate effectively, and provide meaningful feedback help employees align their goals with organizational objectives, thereby enhancing motivation and contributing to

organizational success. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT), McAnally and Hagger (2024) confirmed that leaders must help employees maintain autonomous forms of motivation and reduce controlled motivation to sustain engagement. Leaders should exercise different levels of autonomy and control depending on employees' competence to make informed strategic decisions. In applying such differentiated autonomy, leaders must also consider variations in employee needs related to gender, age, and especially job position (Hitka et al., 2021). By balancing transparency, accountability, and context-sensitive autonomy, leaders cultivate an environment that sustains employee motivation while aligning individual contributions with organizational performance.

Promoting employee participation and autonomy emerged as a core motivational strategy through which leaders empower staff to develop problem-solving skills, confidence, and intrinsic motivation. P3 reported that leaders motivate staff by encouraging them to participate in solving challenges, learn from these experiences, and apply acquired skills to future problems. Cooper and Hamman (2021) emphasized that strategic delegation of authority is a defining characteristic of effective leadership, as it enhances accountability, strengthens team capabilities, and fosters employee growth. When employees are encouraged to "learn by doing," they gain experience, build problem-solving confidence, and become increasingly motivated. Leaders who provide positive feedback reinforce participation, empower staff to act autonomously, and strengthen intrinsic motivation. This theme aligns with the SDT conceptual framework, which proposes that motivation is sustained when leaders support employees' innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cook & Artino, 2016;

Deci & Ryan, 1985). Therefore, strengthening employee autonomy and competence enhances meaningful participation and, in turn, increases intrinsic motivation.

Empowering leadership practices that support self-determination and accountability play a pivotal role in strengthening autonomous motivation and improving employee performance. Examining the role of self-determination and accountability in the relationship between empowering leadership, motivation, and performance, O'Donoghue and van der Werff (2022) found that empowering leaders significantly contributes to satisfaction of employees' basic psychological needs, consistent with Cook and Artino (2016). Similarly, C. Kim and Schachter (2015) concluded that leaders who involve employees in decision-making processes create valuable learning opportunities, stimulate innovation, and enhance intrinsic motivation at both individual and organizational levels. As expected in SDT, the satisfaction of psychological needs is closely associated with autonomous motivation. Leaders who consistently exhibit empowering leadership behaviors and clearly communicate organizational values and the meaningfulness of individual roles are better positioned to achieve the benefits of sustained autonomous motivation among employees.

Inclusive leadership and feedback-seeking behaviors further strengthen motivation by fostering learning, innovation, and confidence through self-determination processes. Drawing on SDT, Zafar et al. (2024) argued that inclusive leadership fosters autonomous motivation, which enhances inclusive work behaviors, innovation, and trust between employees and leaders. While innovation may involve risk, employees can build confidence through experiential learning and constructive supervisor feedback. Cheng et

al. (2023) confirmed that feedback-seeking behavior is essential to employee self-change and self-improvement, contributing to the ongoing development of employees' knowledge and abilities. Their work expanded the SDT literature by demonstrating the motivational significance of feedback-seeking behavior. Through inclusive leadership and continuous feedback, leaders create an environment that supports learning, builds competence, and sustains employee motivation over time.

Effective leaders in nonprofit settings enhance employee motivation by involving staff in decision-making, cultivating skills, fostering accountability, and reinforcing learning from mistakes. Zareen et al. (2015) found that employees reported higher motivation when invited to participate in decisions and observe the positive consequences of those decisions. G. Thompson and Glasø (2015) and Shuck et al. (2018) further confirmed that participative leadership strengthens competence, sustains motivation, and improves overall performance. Arslan and Demir (2020) extended these findings by demonstrating that participative decision-making enhances intrinsic motivation, which subsequently improves performance. Ayesuwa and Okwuokei (2023) reported that participative leadership increases task confidence and creative engagement by delegating responsibility. Similarly, Mpuangnan et al. (2024) found that participative leadership enhances employee performance in educational nonprofits through increased job satisfaction. Additionally, Kwon and Kim (2025) demonstrated that participative decision-making improves cognitive flexibility, which correlates with heightened creativity and proactive behavior. Together, these findings reinforce SDT's assertion that autonomy and competence, facilitated through participative decision-making, support

intrinsic motivation.

By directly involving employees, leaders create psychologically empowering environments in which staff feel capable, valued, and internally driven. The studies by Ayesuwa and Okwuokei (2023) and Mpuangnan et al. (2024) show that the motivational benefits of participation translate into measurable performance outcomes, while Kwon and Kim's (2025) findings highlight the cognitive advantages that support adaptability and innovation, critical qualities in nonprofit contexts. Therefore, in examining leadership strategies within nonprofit organizations, this study explored how participative decision-making influences intrinsic motivation and performance. This approach supports a data-informed evaluation of participative leadership as a strategic lever for sustainable organizational effectiveness.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative single-case study was to explore the leadership strategies that nonprofit organization (NPO) leaders use to motivate employees. The research findings contribute meaningfully to business practice and highlight important areas for further scholarly investigation, particularly in the motivation of nonprofit employees. The primary finding emerging from this study is the critical importance of a holistic approach to employee motivation, one that integrates interconnected extrinsic and intrinsic motivational strategies. Evidence from the case study, supported by recent literature, underscores the effectiveness of leadership behaviors that meet employees' psychological needs and promote self-development as a means of enhancing motivation. For example, Ferraro et al. (2017), applying self-determination theory, conceptualized

work motivation as multidimensional and anchored in three basic psychological needs that are universal for well-being and growth: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Recent studies also supported this view. Bakri and Al Mazrouei (2023) confirmed a positive and significant relationship between leadership behavior styles and employee motivation. In agreement, Mousavifard (2024) recognized human capital, which shapes leadership behavior, as an organization's most valuable asset and a source of creativity and innovation. Jalali et al. (2023) and Ayat et al. (2023) further demonstrated that trust in leadership enhances employee creativity and innovation, which in turn increases employee motivation. Building on these findings, I translated the empirical insights into actionable leadership strategies aimed at strengthening employee motivation within nonprofit organizations.

Based on the findings of this case study, I recommend that leaders in NPOs employ six core strategies to motivate employees: (a) foster vertical and horizontal trust, (b) promote psychological safety, (c) encourage knowledge sharing, (d) support creativity and innovation, (e) enhance intrinsic motivation, and (f) practice effective communication. Leaders should intentionally build trust both vertically (between leaders and employees) and horizontally (among peers) to cultivate psychologically safe work environments. Psychologically safe climates encourage open dialogue, risk-taking, and idea-sharing without fear of judgment or retaliation. Trust and safety support the free flow of information, enhancing learning, collaboration, and engagement across the organization. Leaders should model and reinforce behaviors that encourage learning, stimulate creative thinking, and foster innovation, key components of a dynamic and

forward-thinking organizational culture. By cultivating trust, safety, and innovation, leaders can strengthen employees' intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing engagement and performance. Effective communication is also essential; leaders should communicate transparently, consistently, and empathetically. Leaders who demonstrate strong communication skills contribute to positive relationships, reinforce trust and respect, and motivate employees by helping them understand organizational goals, decisions, and expectations.

Analysis of the case study findings suggested several leadership behaviors that influence employee motivation, including two-way communication, transparency, accountability, leading by example, building trust and confidence, team building, networking, and strong supervisory relationships. Effective communication was identified as particularly influential in fostering interpersonal relationships, strengthening respect between leaders and employees, and building trust, all of which contribute to employee motivation. Klopota et al. (2018) similarly identified effective communication and personnel management as the most influential parameters shaping a healthy work environment, employee motivation, and business performance in diverse organizations. To communicate effectively, leaders must be accessible, practice active listening, demonstrate empathy, provide clear feedback, and use varied communication channels. Such communication fosters trust and engagement while ensuring that employees clearly understand organizational vision and the rationale behind decisions.

The research also highlighted the importance of organizational policies and procedures as foundational elements of organizational success. Vanitha and Sankar

(2024) found that training and development programs significantly enhance employee motivation, knowledge, and job satisfaction, all of which increase organizational productivity and performance. Joldeş et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of organizational policies that foster autonomy and relatedness as mechanisms for improving engagement and performance. This study revealed that diverse organizational policies, including those governing material rewards, resource allocation, recognition for results, recruitment, induction, retention, and staff development, are essential for promoting employee motivation. Therefore, nonprofit organizations should invest in organizational policies that align with their mission and meaningfully support employee motivation.

Alignment with mission and values emerged as an additional critical factor influencing employee motivation. Prysmakova (2021) found that despite operational challenges, nonprofit employees remain deeply committed to the organizational cause. Fegert et al. (2021) argued that mission statements can serve as powerful motivators by articulating an organization's core values, purpose, and strategies. This study revealed that proper orientation of new staff to the organizational mission, objectives, and the organization's impact in the lives of beneficiaries is essential for employee motivation. Zhang et al. (2018) also found that workers in the social sector are motivated by contributing to solutions to societal problems because they identify with the purpose of their work, rather than being driven solely by external rewards. These findings suggest that leaders should intentionally attract, recruit, and retain employees whose personal values align with the organization's mission. Leaders of NPOs must create environments

that enable employees to meet their personal motivational needs and experience alignment between their work, the organizational mission, and their broader sense of purpose. In mission-driven nonprofit organizations, intangible motivational strategies, such as recognition, empowerment, and meaningful work, often outweigh salaries and other material incentives.

The analysis also emphasized the importance of promoting employee participation as a motivational strategy. Zhang et al. (2018) confirmed that opportunities to contribute to solving social challenges are a strong source of motivation for employees in social sector organizations. Guinot et al. (2021) found that participative decision-making increases job satisfaction directly and indirectly through perceptions of trust. Mirosavljević et al. (2023) reported that most employees, especially those in middle and senior leadership roles, are more motivated by participatory practices, such as training, career development, decision-making authority, and problem-solving, than by salaries or material rewards. Leaders who provide opportunities for employees to participate in decisions and organizational problem-solving enhance motivation and satisfaction. Recent research by Kehinde (2024) found that empowering employees and promoting collaboration in decision-making improves job satisfaction and retention in nonprofit settings. Hunter et al. (2025) further supported the adoption of participative leadership styles. Joldeş et al. (2025) argued that empowering employees through need satisfaction enhances their commitment and performance. Drawing on SDT, Zafar et al. (2024) demonstrated that inclusive leadership increases trust in leadership and fosters autonomous motivation, which in turn enhances innovation. This relationship was

strongest in contexts characterized by high levels of leadership trust. By promoting employee participation, leaders can enhance satisfaction and motivation, ultimately contributing to improved job performance and organizational outcomes.

Implications for Social Change

The findings from this case study on leadership strategies to motivate employees in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have significant implications for positive social change at the individual, community, organizational, and societal levels. Research demonstrates that effective leadership and motivation strategies directly influence operational efficiency, employee engagement, and organizational resilience (M. N. Islam et al., 2025). Motivated employees exhibit improved performance, greater innovation, and stronger commitment, which reinforce organizational success and long-term sustainability (Ramchandani, 2024). Studies consistently show that work motivation positively affects job satisfaction and performance, both of which are critical for organizational growth (Kusentyo Putra & Kurniawati, 2024). Carpenter and Gong (2016) found that motivated NPO employees produce 72% more output toward fulfilling the organizational mission than unmotivated employees. Grounded in self-determination theory, these findings underscore the critical role of leadership in fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key motivational drivers. By implementing strategies that enhance intrinsic motivation, NPOs can generate measurable benefits across individual, organizational, community, and societal levels, ultimately strengthening their capacity for sustainable social impact.

At the individual level, strategies that meet employees' material and

psychological needs promote well-being, mental health, job satisfaction, and work–life balance. Leadership practices such as participatory decision-making, recognition, and mentorship foster empowerment and skill development, enabling employees to connect their work to the organization’s mission and derive a deeper sense of meaning. At the organizational level, effective motivational strategies enhance productivity, retention, innovation, and overall organizational resilience. At the community and societal levels, motivated employees contribute to skill development, reduced unemployment, increased volunteerism, strengthening local economies, and social cohesion (Olusadum & Anulika, 2018). Leaders who prioritize motivation can advance sustainable development, improve employment outcomes, and enhance community well-being. By applying these findings, NPO leaders can create supportive environments that empower employees, enhance organizational performance, and generate ripple effects that benefit families, communities, and society at large. Effective leadership in NPOs is therefore not only essential for internal effectiveness but also serves as a catalyst for broader social transformation.

In conclusion, these insights offer practical guidance for strengthening leadership strategies and maximizing employee motivation in nonprofit organizations. Safitri and Nugroho (2023) affirmed the leadership role in fostering positive changes that enhance employee motivation and support organizational goals. The importance of a multifaceted approach to employee motivation, highlighting the continued relevance of financial incentives and the equally significant role of nonmonetary strategies, is reinforced by recent research (Ce et al., 2025; Mohamed et al., 2025), which demonstrates a substantial

positive impact on employee performance. These recommendations for adopting a balanced approach provide actionable insights for nonprofit organizations seeking to enhance employee motivation and improve overall performance. Manzoor et al. (2021) further supported the significant impact of intrinsic rewards on employee performance. In resource-constrained environments, these findings have critical implications for nonprofit organizations operating with limited financial resources. Scholars may use the results of this study to deepen their understanding of the strategies NPO leaders use to motivate employees. Ultimately, this research has the potential to contribute to meaningful social change by strengthening leadership effectiveness, enhancing organizational culture, improving staff well-being, and increasing the positive impact that NPOs have on the communities they serve. Through stronger leadership and better motivational practices, nonprofit organizations can become more dynamic agents of transformation, modeling the social justice, collaboration, and empowerment they seek to promote in society.

Recommendations for Further Study

Leaders of nonprofit organizations can utilize the findings of this research project to evaluate current employee motivation strategies. Future research on leadership strategies to motivate employees in nonprofit organizations can address existing limitations and explore broader perspectives to enhance business practices. The present study faced several limitations, including a small sample size, the use of purposive sampling strategies, a limited geographic scope, reliance on exclusively self-reported data, and potential discrepancies between reported and actual practices. Self-reported data may introduce bias because leaders might respond in socially desirable ways or avoid

acknowledging strategies that were ineffective, thereby limiting the accuracy of the findings. Aguboshim (2021) described the complexity of determining adequate sample sizes for qualitative case studies, emphasizing that data saturation lacks clear practical guidelines and is often shaped by subjective researcher judgment. Ahmad and Wilkins (2025) similarly noted that while purposive sampling ensures theoretical relevance, its non-random nature may introduce selection bias and limit the generalizability of findings. Stratton (2024) further argued that purposive sampling, although efficient, may threaten validity if researchers overinterpret results or overlook publication biases inherent in non-probability sampling designs. These constraints may affect both the depth and transferability of findings, limiting their applicability to other contexts or settings.

Future researchers could expand the scope of this project to overcome these limitations and generate more comprehensive insights. Increasing the sample size and enhancing participant diversity, such as including nonprofit leaders from a wider range of organization sizes, sectors, and geographic regions, would improve the transferability of results. In qualitative research, transferability refers to the degree to which findings fit a new context rather than statistical representativeness. McLeod (2024) emphasized that transferability depends on the “degree of fit,” or *fittingness*, which readers assess based on how richly the original research describes its context. Replicating this research across multiple settings is also supported by Makel et al. (2022), who argued that replication in qualitative research strengthens understanding of contextual influences and enhances transferability across diverse environments.

In addition, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data would strengthen

the validity of findings. Mixed-methods designs may utilize questionnaires, observations, and interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership strategies that influence employee motivation. Creswell and Poth (2018) highlighted that mixed-methods approaches enhance validity by combining quantifiable results from standardized tools with in-depth qualitative insights. Integrating performance metrics, such as goal attainment, could further enrich the analysis. Established instruments such as the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) offer reliable measures of intrinsic motivation in workplace settings (Furnham & Cuppello, 2025). Researchers might also apply multivariate measurement models, such as the Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (MWMS), to strengthen construct validity through multiple theoretical perspectives and validation criteria (Paquette et al., 2025). Collectively, these approaches may improve both internal and external validity in future motivation research.

A longitudinal research design could also be valuable, enabling researchers to examine how leadership strategies influence employee motivation over time. Longitudinal studies, including those by Mindeguia et al. (2021) and Reizer et al. (2019), demonstrate that tracking motivational processes across multiple time points provides robust evidence of long-term effectiveness. Emerging workplace factors also warrant investigation. The increasing prevalence of remote work and technological advancements, including artificial intelligence, have reshaped the work environment and may influence motivation. Stenling et al. (2025) found that remote work intensity can enhance perceptions of need-supportive leadership, while Croitoru et al. (2025) identified how AI-driven HR systems shape intrinsic and extrinsic motivational processes.

Resource constraints remain a central challenge for nonprofit organizations. Mohamed et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of balancing financial and non-financial incentives to sustain engagement in resource-limited settings. Cross-cultural perspectives are also essential, as leadership and motivation differ across cultural contexts (G. Chen & Kirkman, 2024; Nwankwo et al., 2024). Examining the interplay between leadership strategies, organizational culture, and cultural diversity may yield valuable global insights.

Broader and more holistic research approaches would contribute to refining business practices surrounding employee motivation. These approaches could help nonprofit organizations develop more effective strategies for motivating employees with varying competencies and skill sets. Research is also needed to explore mechanisms for measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies, as current literature offers limited guidance on this theme. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of employee motivation in nonprofit organizations, helping leaders balance intrinsic mission-driven motivations with practical incentives to sustain performance in mission-driven, resource-constrained environments.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study explored leadership strategies that nonprofit organization leaders employ to motivate employees. Five purposively selected participants, each working in a nonprofit organization and demonstrating the ability to motivate their employees, participated in semistructured interviews conducted through videoconferencing. Data were collected through interviews and an analysis of publicly

available organizational documents. NVivo qualitative software supported the coding and thematic analysis. Yin's five-step model guided the analytical process and resulted in five emergent themes: leadership behavior; organizational policy framework and procedures; measuring the effectiveness of motivational strategies; alignment with mission and values; and promoting employee participation and autonomy. These themes aligned with the composite conceptual framework grounded in (a) self-determination theory, which posits that motivation is enhanced when leaders support employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and (b) Vroom's expectancy theory, which explains how motivation is shaped by expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, the belief that effort leads to performance, performance leads to outcomes, and outcomes have value to the individual.

Key findings highlighted the importance of leadership behaviors that create positive work environments and motivate employees. Practices such as effective two-way communication, transparency, reinforcing accountability, leading by example, building trust, team building, networking, and fostering strong supervisor-employee relationships emerged as central drivers of motivation. The findings emphasized the significance of transparent and fair management of organizational resources and the role of accountability in strengthening motivation. Open communication about resource allocation, professional development, and performance expectations further enhanced alignment between employee performance and the organizational mission while supporting growth and skill development. Additionally, the study found that leading by example, fostering teamwork, and

nurturing a mission-driven work culture are powerful motivators within nonprofit settings.

Organizational policy frameworks and procedures, including reward systems, resource limitations, recognition practices, recruitment and induction strategies, staff retention, and capacity-building programs, also emerged as critical components of employee motivation. Participants emphasized the importance of aligning employees with the organization's mission and values from the outset, particularly through induction processes that clarify objectives and communicate the organization's impact. Effective communication enabled leaders to articulate a compelling vision and clear goals, helping employees connect their personal values with the mission of the organization.

Promoting employee participation and autonomy also emerged as a key motivational strategy. Leaders who encouraged employees to engage in decision making created opportunities for learning, innovation, and the enhancement of intrinsic motivation. The analysis demonstrated strong connections between these findings and established motivational theories, reinforcing the notion that a holistic, integrated approach to motivation is most effective within nonprofit organizations.

Overall, the meaningfulness of work in nonprofit organizations is closely tied to contributing to human well-being and fostering a sense of community. Employees in this sector are largely motivated by alignment between their personal values and the organization's mission and vision. Therefore, leaders must consistently articulate a clear and compelling organizational purpose to sustain motivation. Although

participants acknowledged the necessity of monetary incentives, intrinsic motivators, such as purpose, mastery, autonomy, and alignment with mission, proved more influential than material rewards. Prior research supports this, demonstrating that financial incentives may undermine intrinsic motivation, whereas positive feedback enhances it (Deci & Ryan, 2017). In resource-constrained environments, nonprofit leaders should prioritize strategies that strengthen intrinsic motivation, including transparent communication, continuous learning, trust-building, and employee participation. These practices foster psychological safety, creativity, and appropriate risk-taking, ultimately supporting organizational reliability and innovation. The findings of this study extend existing knowledge on motivational strategies in nonprofit leadership by emphasizing the centrality of intrinsic motivation in achieving long-term organizational success. They also reinforce the importance of a holistic, mission-driven approach to leadership that integrates behavioral, organizational, and psychological factors to effectively motivate nonprofit employees

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What leadership strategies do you use to motivate employees?
2. What leadership strategies did you find most effective in motivating employees?
3. How do you measure the effectiveness of the leadership strategies you use to motivate employees?
4. What key challenges did you experience in implementing leadership strategies to motivate employees?
5. How did you overcome the key challenges in implementing leadership strategies to motivate employees?
6. How do employees react to your leadership strategies to increase motivation?
7. What other information can you provide regarding the leadership strategies you use to motivate employees?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date _____

Time _____

Location _____

Participant _____

Participant Identifier _____

Position of Participant _____

Introduction:

Greetings. My name is Clara Dube, and I will be conducting the interview with you today to understand leadership strategies leaders in your organization, use to motivate employees within your company. Thank you for taking the time with me today. For the purposes of ensuring accuracy of the valuable information you will provide me, please permit me to record this interview and take notes as the interview. I will ask you a few questions, please feel free to elaborate as much as you'd like. The interview is scheduled to take no longer than about 45-60 minutes. Please, let me know if you need a break at any moment.

Before we begin, do you have any questions or anything you would like to say?

Instructions:

Review the purpose of the study with participant.

Tell participant: The purpose of this qualitative, single-case study is to explore leadership strategies that nonprofit leaders use to motivate employees.

Please let me know if you have any question regarding this?

Review the informed consent form with participant and ensure the participant agrees to participant and sign the form.

If in person, complete two forms. One is for the researcher, the other is for the participant.

If conducting via phone or video: after reviewing the form and answering any questions, the respondent will reply to the e-mail with “I consent” if he or she agrees to participant.

Tell participant: This is the informed consent form that I sent to you by email (read with participant). Do you have any questions or concerns regarding this form? If you are in agreement, please sign and date. One copy is for you.

Allocate a number (identifier) to participant and record on top of page. Participant will be identified as (P). The number will correspond to the order of interviews.

Begin recording the interview.

Tell participant: If you are ready, I will now begin recording.

Begin interview by identifying the (P + number) according to interview order.

Follow the order of the questions, probing deeper as needed.

Tell participant: We are going to start the interview now; I will record the interview and also take notes during your answers when needed. Please feel free to stop me at any time and ask questions. Feel free to ask questions at any time or refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Take notes next to questions as needed.

Make sure of the interview time.

Ask all the interview questions as listed below.

1. What leadership strategies do you use to motivate employees?
2. What leadership strategies did you find most effective in motivating employees?
3. How do you measure the effectiveness of the leadership strategies you use to motivate employees?
4. What key challenges did you experience in implementing leadership strategies to motivate employees?
5. How did you overcome the key challenges in implementing leadership strategies to motivate employees?
6. How do employees react to your leadership strategies to increase motivation?
7. What other information can you provide regarding the leadership strategies you use to motivate employees?

Tell participant: That was my last question. This interview is now completed. Do you have any final questions or comments before I conclude the interview and stop recording?

Review contact information if participant has any future questions.

Tell participant: If you have any questions or any additional information you would like to share after this interview, please feel free to contact me via the information on the consent form.

Thank the participant for their time and effort.

Tell participant: I truly appreciate you taking the time and effort from your busy schedule to respond to my interview and assist me with this study.