AOSIS

The perceived influence of Christian leadership competencies during COVID-19

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Purpose: Surviving the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic required much of leaders. It highlighted the complexities of faith in the workplace. Christian business leaders drew on their faith to influence employees' work intentions and behaviours through specific leadership competencies. This study aimed to gain insights into the leadership competencies of Christian leaders during COVID-19 and its perceived influence on colleagues' values and workplace behaviour through the leaders' integration of faith and work.

Design/methodology/approach: The study used a qualitative, grounded theory approach with semi-structured interviews to collect data. Participants ($N = 14$) were full-time Christian leaders selected through purposeful, convenient, and snowball sampling.

Findings/results: The findings indicated that Christian business leaders exhibited distinctive leadership competencies attributed to their faith. These competencies allowed them to express their beliefs to co-workers in ways that surpassed verbal communication.

Practical implications: Organisations should consider implementing leadership development programmes focusing on integrating faith and values into leadership practices. Providing Christian leaders with tools and resources to align their leadership approach with their spiritual beliefs can enhance their ability to create a positive and ethical workplace culture.

Contribution/value-add: Although no study has directly explored religion's role in dealing with pandemics, understanding the impact of beliefs such as Christian religiosity on work can complement management and organisational practices. The findings contribute to leadership studies by laying the groundwork for future investigation into the role of faith integration in leadership behaviours and outcomes.

Keywords: leadership; leadership competencies; Christian religiosity; faith-work integration; work attitudes and values; influence.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 brought up unforeseen challenges in the workplace, requiring prompt action from managers and leaders at all levels. Leaders were ill-equipped to anticipate and address unforeseen challenges when it came to assisting their staff in adapting to and managing significant changes in the work and social landscape (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Consequently, leaders at all levels, across the globe, had to address the immediate and indirect consequences of the crisis in a dynamic and evolving context (Ahern & Loh, 2021).

This raises the inquiry of the applicability of conventional leadership approaches in the transformative contemporary work environment. Many renowned scholars have opinions on the best leadership style that fits a specific context. Some of the most prominent leadership theories and paradigms to date evolve around the Great Man era, also known as the trait theory (1930–1940), the behavioural era (1940–1950), the situational era (1960), the new leadership, or transactional and transformational leadership (1990), and others are the key periods in the theory of leadership that emerged in the 2000s (Olkowicz & Jarosik-Michalak, 2022). Each leader is unique, with a distinct leadership style that significantly impacts the individuals they work with and the achievement of their objectives (Al Khajeh, 2018). During COVID-19, leaders who successfully navigated the crisis demonstrated resilience, compassion, optimism, and forward-thinking (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Hatami et al., 2020).

Against this background, the main objective of this research is to determine how the leadership competencies of Christian business leaders influenced their colleagues' beliefs and actions amid difficult circumstances. More specifically, this research was driven by the research question:

By expressing and integrating faith and work, how did the Christian business leaders' work attitudes and values influence their fellow workers' values and workplace culture in these trying times?

The research focussed specifically on representative executive leaders of various industries in South Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new reality that demanded leaders and executives to remain dedicated to their duties and responsibilities while dealing with complex challenges and motivating employees (Okpara & Ntshangase, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a 'new reality' that offers fresh opportunities for both organisational researchers and professionals (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2020). According to Miller and Ewest (2018), it remains uncertain how individuals of religion can fully integrate themselves, along with their religious beliefs, into the workplace. Furthermore, there is a shortage of available tools to assist them in this process. In addition to challenging presumptions, the COVID-19 crisis offered a unique opportunity for people to align their ideas with their faith's central values.

Literature review

This section of literature review will explore the relevant literature on leadership competencies, the implications of COVID-19 for leadership, Christianity at work, and faith-based leadership.

Leadership competencies

Leadership competencies are defined as knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to operate effectively in a leadership capacity (McCall et al., 1988). Leadership competency is mostly dependent on the duties and goals of a specific leadership function, as opposed to general leadership behaviours and abilities that are applicable to all leadership roles regardless of the situation (Hollenbeck et al., 2006). Leadership competencies, unlike more straightforward knowledge, skills, and abilities, are less susceptible to training. This implies a recommendation for embracing long-term, experience-based developmental initiatives (Day et al., 2004). According to Dirani et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how crucial it is for the business community to regularly assess the dangers within an organisation's surroundings. The pandemic revealed that organisations will thrive under a leadership competence that: (1) provides strong roles and purpose; (2) has competent leaders; (3) communicates; (4) provides employees with access to technology; (5) puts the emotional stability of its employees first; (6) keeps organisations financially sound; and (7) promotes organisational resilience.

Implications of COVID-19 for leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption in the conventional workplace, compelling numerous leaders to navigate unfamiliar and unforeseen circumstances (Fernandez & Clerkin, 2021). According to Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021), leaders had to demonstrate key competencies such as empathy, compassion, attentiveness, and sensitivity to maintain employee excellence and also company success. As a result, leaders had to adapt their leadership approaches to foster personalised reports and empower staff members while being cognisant of individual's diverse experiences and responses. By encouraging constant learning, innovation, and development, leaders could foster an environment of excellence and inspire staff members to aim for high standards of proficiency (Risley, 2020). Maintaining performance requires not only the provision of resources for career development but also emotional support (Nyamande-Pitso, 2022). Therefore, it was imperative for leaders to recognise the psychological effects of the pandemic on workers' personal life to cultivate a caring work environment (Fernandez & Clerkin, 2021).

Following the impact of COVID-19, leaders may now recognise the necessity of acquiring additional information regarding their leadership skills (Renjen, 2020). Leaders recognised that agility, innovative leadership, and flexibility were essential for employee morale, business operations, and maintaining a consistent work-life balance (Amah & Ogah, 2023). Building trust during the pandemic necessitated transparent communication from leaders regarding the severity of the crisis, managing expectations, and providing assistance (Dimitrovska et al., 2023). Leaders can cultivate trust and dependability through their dedication and by steering clear of instilling fear. According to Adhitama and Riyanto (2020), effective communication, employee motivation, and performance maintenance necessitate supporting well-being, fostering connections, and providing opportunities for professional development.

Christianity at work

A model developed by McGhee and Habets (2018), shows the work that a Christian does contributes significantly to the goal or purpose that God had in mind when He created the world, while also serving as a kind of worship that directs attention back to God. Many Christians have tried to follow a 'holistic' approach in the practise of their faith by opposing the idea that religion should be restricted to the 'private' sphere of one's life and not be included in one's profession. A popular book on business leadership and management, *The Man Nobody Knows*, by Barton (2000), promoted Jesus as a role model for business leaders. *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren (2002) is a good example of the way in which Christian authors encourage readers to put their faith into practise in everyday life and work and how many Christians believe that one will not be able to live a meaningful and rewarding life without doing so.

Christian faith and Christian spirituality at work, therefore, complement each other, as both implicate a practise of daily lived Christianity reflecting God back to Himself (McGhee & Habets, 2018). In other words, faith at work for a Christian means having an active living faith in their place of work. Humanity is made better, not worse, when accepting

Christ; the way people live and work adopts a new significance and purpose as we become part of God's love and design for creation. A Christian faith at work implies working hard in society (the environment included) through the Spirit to achieve God's final purpose: a renewed and redeemed creation, expressing itself back to God (Staniloae, 2000).

Faith-based leadership

Faith-based leadership goes beyond organisational goals, by prioritising the general growth and well-being of individuals (Dantley, 2006; Grothe, 2022). Leaders guided by faith values focus on morality, integrity, fairness, and compassion in decision-making. According to Hicks (2003), faith-based leaders' self-perceptions are influenced by their beliefs, which frequently causes them to take on the role of 'servant leaders', giving followers' needs and development top priority. This approach seeks to foster personal and professional growth in a setting shaped by faith values (Liu, 2019).

Leaders, deriving power from their religious beliefs, exemplify characteristics such as perseverance, positive outlook, and ability to recover from setbacks (Barnard & Mamabolo, 2019). They place importance on honesty, genuineness, and leadership based on principles, in order to establish trust and foster a sense of belonging among their followers. According to Shah (2020), faith-based leadership places great importance on qualities such as perseverance, servant leadership, and compassion. It prioritises the well-being of followers and underlines the need for social responsibility in order to bring about positive change. Faith-based leaders contribute positively to individuals, organisations, and society by promoting excellence and upholding core values (Shah, 2020). This literature analysis serves as the foundation for a study on the perceived influence of Christian leadership competencies during COVID-19, focusing on the alignment with values and faith.

Research approach and design

This study followed a qualitative research design, which is typically the best option when the main goal is to investigate, describe, or explain (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The primary researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs regarding this research lean towards a combination of realism and constructivism. Regarding ontological beliefs, the main researcher believes that there is an objective external reality that exists apart from our views, indicating that faith had a practical influence on leadership in COVID-19 (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The fact that everyone constructs their own understanding of the world based on their experiences, interactions, and assumptions is acknowledged. This is consistent with the notion that the faith-based decisions and behaviour of Christian business leaders improved both their personal and organisational excellence. The epistemological viewpoints tend to be constructivist and pragmatic. The main researcher believes that people actively create their own

knowledge via their experiences and relationships (Mason, 2018). In the framework of the research, it was important to consider the personal experiences and interpretations of Christian business leaders and the significance they assigned to their faith to fully understand how they drew on it during COVID-19. This pragmatic approach suggests that the research's value lies in its practical applicability or how the new insights might help people and organisations perform better in real-world circumstances.

Research strategy

This article forms part of a larger study for which grounded theory was used as the research strategy. Grounded theory is suitable for situations where there is limited knowledge about a phenomenon and aims to develop a theory that explains a process related to the main topic of study (Birks & Mills, 2015). The selection of grounded theory as the methodology for this study is driven by its focus on social processes and interactions, exploring what occurs and how individuals engage with each other. Grounded theory studies aim to uncover the meanings that influence the behaviour of participants, recognising the limited existing knowledge in this area (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Research method

According to Keeves (1997), methodology refers to the research design, methods, approaches, and procedures used in a well-planned study in order to discover something. Participants, instruments, data-gathering, analysis and interpretation all form part of the broad field of methodology (Crotty, 1998). The research methods applied for this study are presented in the ensuing section.

Entrée and researcher roles

In grounded theory research, the researcher aims to systematically generate theory grounded in data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Qualitative research demands reflection, critical thinking, and creativity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The entrée process in qualitative research is crucial for data quality, relying on mutual respect and trust between the researcher and participants (Morse, 1991). The research setting was carefully selected to align with the research question and population, considering cultural, social, and physical contexts. Given the pandemic, a managed entrée process ensured access and adherence to COVID-19 protocols and built trust with participants.

Sampling

Most grounded theory research begins with purposive sampling, followed by concurrent data production, collection, and analysis involving various phases such as coding, constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and memo writing. Theoretical sampling is used until theoretical saturation is achieved, as stated by Charmaz (2014). Following Charmaz's (2014) recommendations,

14 participants were selected for this study using a mix of purposive sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling methods. The participants needed to understand the phenomena being studied, be communicative, able to reflect, and be willing to have detailed and in-depth conversations with the researcher. At the beginning of the research process, informal connections and potential study participants were identified and reached out to. The participants were required to be Christian leaders holding executive-management positions in organisations in South Africa. Furthermore, they were required to believe in the Holy Trinity, comprising the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as in the Bible as core foundations of Christian leadership. Table 1 describes the participants.

Data collection methods

In this qualitative grounded theory study, mainly interviews (semi-structured, in-depth) were used for the purpose of this study giving the researcher the opportunity to dive deeply into the experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints of the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method gave participants the freedom to express their ideas and feelings by using open-ended questions and a flexible interview structure as recommended by Fontana and Frey (2005). This helped to facilitate the development of rich data that were relevant to the environment in which it was collected. This method supported the inductive and theory-building character of grounded theory research by revealing patterns, themes, and concepts hidden within the data. At the same time, it allowed for the flexibility to investigate unanticipated lines of inquiry. Because semi-structured interviews provide a balance between standardised and unstructured approaches, they are an ideal instrument for capturing the complex and nuanced data in this study, which is necessary for the development of a grounded theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Recording of data

The data were collected via notes and recorded interviews. The sections relevant to the research questions were transcribed, with the initial interview serving as a template for subsequent transcriptions, following the guidance of Bogdan and Biklen (2003). All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' consent. After conducting the interviews, transcriptions were created and cross-referenced with the recordings to ensure precision. Memos are crucial in qualitative research for recording and analysing data, as they assist researchers in staying organised and identifying connections among data (Maxwell & Reybold, 2015). After each initial interview, the primary researcher maintained a journal to document impartial emotions and reflections. This exercise facilitated the identification of initial impressions and detection of recurring patterns in the participants' responses. As proposed by Sbaraini et al. (2011), the memos facilitated the comparison of personal reflections, improved data analysis, and guided additional data collection. As per Chun Tie et al.'s (2019) recommendation, several interviews were conducted before analysing these memos about the documents' findings.

Data analyses

The study utilised grounded theory as a systematic approach to analyse qualitative data, following Glaser's conventional methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The essence of a grounded theory research design involves the concurrent creation, gathering, and examination of data. Before any

TABLE 1: Descriptions of participants.

Participant	Participants' characteristics
Participant A	Married white male, aged 52. BCom Accounting and Finance qualification. Works as chief executive officer at an office products retail and distribution company in the test and measurement industry.
Participant B	Married black female, aged 37. BSc (Hons) in Information Science, a Master's in Development Communication and is currently completing her PhD. Works as a senior consultant and director at a company in the development sector.
Participant C	Married white female, aged 38. BCom Accounting and Honours (CTA). CA (SA). Postgraduate Certificate in Education. Qualified life coach. Works as an executive head in a company in the education sector.
Participant D	Married white male, aged 53. BCom Accounting degree. Works as chief financial executive officer in the security industry.
Participant E	Married white male, aged 39. BSc Engineering (Electronic). Various business courses. He works as the managing director of a company with dealings in the news, dealers and publishing sector.
Participant F	Married white male aged 48. Qualified CA with a master's degree in tax. Works as chief operating officer for a private equity investment company.
Participant G	Married white male, aged 47. BSc IT qualification and an MBA from a U.K.-based business school. He works as the chief executive officer at a company in the financial technology (fintech) industry.
Participant H	Married white female, aged 38. Postgraduate studies in biochemistry, specialising in HIV research. Subsequently qualified as an educator. Works as an executive director with a demonstrated history of working in the management consulting industry.
Participant I	Married white male aged 53. His qualifications include BLC (Law), LLB, Hons., MBA and R.E.E.S, Private Equity and Venture Capital from a U.S.-based business school. He is the founder and CEO of a group of companies.
Participant J	Married white male, aged 36. BCom Actuarial Sciences. He works as managing director of a company within the private equity investment sector.
Participant K	Married mixed race male, aged 43. Master's degree: Concept-making and innovation strategy. Senior executive programme in innovation, strategy and leadership. He works as a member of the Exco at a large property development company, with the operational function as head of corporate social responsibility.
Participant L	Unmarried Indian male, aged 48. BSc Computer Science degree. He is the managing director of a company in the communications and technology industry, focussing on all verticals in both the public and private sectors.
Participant M	Married black female, aged 41. Master's in Business Leadership. She works as the chief operating officer at an education management company and head of a foundation.
Participant N	Married black male, aged 46. BSc Physiotherapy. MDP and AMDP Busy completing an MBA. He works as an operations executive in the infrastructure and people-solutions industry.

further data were generated or collected, the initial data were gathered, coded, and analysed following the guidelines of Charmaz and Bryant (2011). After transcribing the interview, the initial step in data analysis was initial coding, which required generating ideas without preconceived notions. Open coding aimed to identify patterns, concepts, and classifications within different data sets. After categories emerged, the process transitioned to intermediate coding, which entailed analysing data to gain a more profound comprehension and exploring code relationships. The researchers improved the coding process by organising final categories and establishing connections, focussing on the most important and relevant codes (Sbaraini et al., 2011). ATLAS.ti was a valuable tool for the research with the process of open coding. This allowed for quick analysis of large amounts of text by extracting text associated with various codes.

Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

The study placed emphasis on credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and reflexivity in order to uphold the quality, trustworthiness, and authenticity of the research. A project journal was employed to systematically record important choices in chronological order, ensuring a coherent and reliable presentation of the research design and implementation. In accordance with Morrow's (2005) recommendations, the transferability of the study was improved by providing a comprehensive account of the research, participants' perspectives, techniques, analyses, and seeking input from fellow researchers.

The main researcher engaged in peer debriefing with supervisors as well as member checking with participants. This process helped to uncover any biases or misinterpretations. Amankwaa (2016) suggested utilising an audit trail to uphold neutrality by allowing others to oversee the decisions made during the study. Engaging in the practise of keeping a reflective journal enabled the main researcher to document their concerns, assumptions, feelings, and experiences, thus promoting reflexivity. The routine evaluations conducted by supervisors provide an external viewpoint to identify any biases. Data saturation was attained by adhering to Amankwaa's (2016) recommendation to continue data collection until no further insights were gained from further information, thereby ensuring confirmability.

Data display

Data visualisation is essential in qualitative research because it allows for the visual and written representation of complexity. Verdinelli and Scagnoli (2013) suggested employing a multidimensional methodology that incorporates diagrams to visually represent relationships and patterns, facilitating comprehension. Networks were built to visually represent intricate relationships between themes and variables, making it easier to see overall patterns. Tabular presentations of structured data summaries enabled systematic comparisons of essential factors. Documentation of narratives was conducted to offer exceptional insights of superior quality.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management of the University of Johannesburg (IPPM-2021-480[D]). The main researcher remained aware of personal biases, avoiding steering participants towards specific answers to maintain study validity. While personal experiences weren't direct data, introspection occurred through journaling and memos. Transparency, informed consent, and respect for participants' cultural norms were paramount, ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded.

Results

The findings of the initial analyses are presented in the following sub-sections. Several rounds of analyses were conducted, and initially, 13 codes were assigned to the participants' responses. After conducting further analysis, a main theme and two subthemes were identified from the participants' responses. Table 2 shows the frequency of subthemes, with subthemes and codes ranked from highest to lowest frequency.

Description of the themes

This section presents a discussion of the main theme and subthemes, followed by relevant examples from the participants to support and illustrate these sub-themes. Table 3 comprises the definitions of the main theme and subthemes. Consistent with the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2021), we defined each topic that was identified, so clarifying the fundamental nature of each theme (i.e., what each theme pertains to).

Main theme: Leadership

The theme *leadership* occurred the most in the data analysis, and codes referring to it were mentioned 236 times. Leadership could further be broken down into two sub-themes, namely, leadership competencies (mentioned 177 times), and leadership

TABLE 2: Themes and subthemes.

Theme/subtheme/code	Frequency
Theme 1: Leadership	236
Subtheme 1.1: Leadership competencies	177
Leadership styles	82
Managing behaviour: Emotional well-being and trauma	19
Managing behaviour: Support and listening	18
Managing behaviour: Trusting in God's plan and provision	17
Managing behaviour: Fear and anxiety	15
Managing behaviour: Faith and trust	11
Adapting to challenges and uncertainties	8
Managing behaviour: Trust in relationships and teams	7
Subtheme 1.2: Leadership and decision-making	59
Faith-guided decisions	25
Confidence and boldness in decision-making	13
Balancing empathy and decisiveness	8
Prioritising long-term goals and values	7
Learning from mistakes	6

TABLE 3: Definitions of main theme and sub-themes.

Theme/subtheme	Definition
Theme 1: Leadership	*Leadership* relates to the ability to effectively guide and manage individuals or groups towards achieving a common goal, while demonstrating personal characteristics, competencies and performance requirements that align with Christian values and ethical standards.
Subtheme 1.1: Leadership competencies	*Leadership Competencies* refers to the set of skills, abilities and behaviours that enable individuals to lead and manage others effectively in the context of Christian values and ethical principles. In this study, leadership competencies are defined as building trust in relationships and teams, adapting to challenges and uncertainties, managing faith and trust, allaying fear and anxiety, relying on God's plan and provision, providing support, actively listening, managing emotional well-being and trauma, and understanding various leadership styles.
Subtheme 1.2: Leadership and decision-making	*Leadership and decision-making* refers to the capacity of Christian leaders to negotiate the challenges posed by the pandemic and to make strategic decisions that are consistent with Christian principles and beliefs. This subtheme encompasses how leaders drew on their faith and personal beliefs to inform decision-making, prioritising the well-being of stakeholders and ensuring business continuity. Effective leadership in the pandemic demanded a blend of empathy, compassion, strategic thinking, and adaptability to changing circumstances.

and decision-making (mentioned 59 times). Descriptions of the subthemes, supported by direct quotes from the participants, are presented next.

Subtheme 1.1: Leadership competencies: The subtheme of leadership competencies emphasises the fundamental skills and characteristics required for successful leadership within the realms of faith and work. It includes various codes that emphasise different facets of leadership skills. The codes highlight the significance of cultivating robust leadership skills based on faith, trust, resilience, compassion, and effective communication. Leaders with these competencies can handle intricate situations, motivate and authorise others, cultivate a favourable work atmosphere, and ensure their actions are in line with their values and beliefs.

The participants' leadership styles were analysed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic within the framework of leadership competencies. Each participant detailed distinctive strategies and qualities in leadership amid COVID-19. The quotes indicate that the participants expressed their perspectives on their personal leadership style, particularly in terms of how they lead and interact with others. Notable leadership styles that were identified include servant leadership (Participant D), accommodative leadership (Participant M), and collaborative leadership (Participant H). Although not all quotes directly correspond to established leadership styles, they offer insights into the attitudes and behaviours of the participants as leaders. This is evident from the following quotes:

'I think a leader should be open and honest, realising that there is a crisis. They must realise that people are suffering and from a Christian side try and help people and not only worry about ourselves.' (Participant D, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'I lead very collaboratively as I have a strong belief in the power of the collective and that God's given us all different giftings and skill sets and ways of thinking that when you bring them together, you can do so much more. So I see my job in leading is trying to unlock the potential in people or the potential that they bring it together, and sort of creating the space for it to flourish.' (Participant H, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'I just see all people the same. So in terms of a leader, at work, I am more accommodating. That's number one. And that's very helpful. Because when you relate to all people the same, they

also relate to you in that way. But if you go in and wants to always put on your leadership cap, people tend to withdraw.' (Participant M, Female, Generation X, Masters Degree, Chief Operating Officer)

Leaders who focussed on *managing emotional well-being and trauma* of their teams showed empathy, sensitivity, and a dedication to their team members' mental health. They acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on people's emotional well-being and put in place initiatives and resources to assist their teams in managing the situation. The following quotes provide evidence for this:

'If you give them that opportunity to just feel like a part of – they belong – some people are going through such a lot of emotional and mental problems. Including them, … also providing access to programmes that enable people to engage, to grow.' (Participant B, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Director)

'They'll tell you exactly what's happening in their hearts and mind. Every morning we started with check-ins to see how people were doing, like how you are doing today and people would be crying or not okay. It was like a way to have everybody sort of sharing how they're doing and everybody's answer that the team could support people.' (Participant E, Male, Millennial, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

'I made it a priority to look after the team, my team, and motivated them to look after their teams. Also, their emotional side was important. I put it in my calendar to check in on them. They had to feel heard. So, we tried to provide assistance whenever we could.' (Participant L, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

Leaders' abilities to *listen and provide support* were crucial for establishing a welcoming and amicable work environment. Leaders who engaged in active listening, showed empathy, and offered support exhibited genuine concern for the well-being of their team members. They acknowledged the importance of addressing individual needs, promoting a sense of community, and establishing a favourable work-life equilibrium. The following quotes illustrate this:

'So you try to calm them down by involving them. Before I speak, I always let my team speak. Ask the question, hear what they say … and then it becomes a conversation where you don't have to do all the thinking, you don't have to come up with all the ideas, because teamwork makes the dream work.' (Participant M, Female, Generation X, Masters Degree, Chief Operating Officer)

'If we can do something, let's do something, if we listen to the person and hear them, even for a person to just be able to say "I'm struggling" or "this is what's happening at home" or whatever, I think already counts, and then obviously if we can do something, then we do it.' (Participant B, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Director)

Leaders who put their *trust in God's plan and provision* had great faith and reliance on divine guidance. Despite the uncertainty, they acknowledged that God had a purpose and a plan. These leaders conveyed this trust to their people, promoting resilience, hope, and harmony. The subsequent quotes exemplify this:

'We are going to plan like we know what's going to happen, but then life's going to happen. And we're going to trust that God's doing this. So that was more my preaching.' (Participant H, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'Be bold enough to trust Him and to do what He told us to do, even though from the outside, it looks sometimes ridiculous to do things. But He has been so faithful in the process. I mean, of all of these things that we've been involved in, it hasn't been easy that I can tell you.' (Participant J, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

'Those are things that I think have played part, even during COVID. To me, this is God has to show at a time when we were at our lowest. And that's when we're going to continue to live in trust.' (Participant N, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Operations Executive)

Maintaining productivity and well-being depended heavily on leaders who could *manage* their own and their teams' *fear and anxiety*. The quotes that follow make this clear:

'I understood that many people were scared. Me too sometimes. So I made sure to listen. I tried to give them a platform, you know, just to share. I think that helped a lot. People heard that they were not alone in feeling afraid.' (Participant D, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'I could only help others and myself to manage the fear and uncertainty by staying positive and reminding everyone to trust in God. We prayed together. That was the only way to face the challenges with hope.' (Participant F, Male, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Operating Officer)

'I could very easily let fear take over. I reminded my team of all the good things we still had and encouraged them to focus on just still to be grateful.' (Participant J, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

'There was a lot of fear, obviously doing the rounds. And it's a fantastic time to point people to God. But also just to acknowledge the fear and taking steps to address it.' (Participant H, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

The analysis recognised the value of leaders who *manage faith and trust* inside themselves and their teams. Amid the challenging COVID-19 era, these leaders depended on their faith for guidance, resilience, and a sense of mission. They cultivated a welcoming and spiritually centred work atmosphere by promoting team members to utilise their personal faith and reliance on God. Having a strong trust and faith in God can be a valuable asset in handling difficult workplace situations. People discussed depending on their faith and belief in God to conquer challenges and navigate personal or professional choices. It often includes discussions about prayer, seeking divine guidance, and the conviction that God has a specific purpose for their lives. The following quotes corroborate this observation:

'The COVID crisis really tested our resilience, but as Christians, we turned to our faith. We had to remind ourselves and our employees that God is in control. Now is the time to trust Him with our fears, our worries, those things we can't control. I tried to create some sense of hope.' (Participant J, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

'I firmly believe that God has a plan for us, even in the midst of the pandemic. It is my faith, the trust in Him only, that gives me peace. It is difficult to share this with non-Christians. To tell them to lean on their faith and trust that God will see us through.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Executive Director)

'So much fear and anxiety. I just had my faith to rely on, to manage my own fears. Had to remind myself of God's promises. And hoped that my words and actions also showed that.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Exco Member)

For leaders dealing with the difficulties and uncertainties of the pandemic, *adapting to challenges and uncertainties* became crucial. They adapted their strategies, plans and procedures to take into account changing conditions. The quotations that follow demonstrate this:

'Yes, and you had to then face the consequences or try and fix what came after. Because it's the first time you did it. You don't know what could go wrong. And it felt to me like everything we did have some issues, everything, because it was the first time we did it.' (Participant C, Female, Millennial, Honours, Executive Head)

'It definitely ruffled the feathers a lot. And it helped us to really rethink everything we were doing. We had said, sit down, and say, like, "but why are we doing this again? Is it even necessary? Why not just stop this and close us all together?" So we took stock and changed a lot of things.' (Participant A, Male, Generation X, Generation Bachelor's Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

The participants emphasised the importance of *trust in relationships and teams*. Leaders who prioritised trust fostered an environment of openness, transparency and mutual respect. This is clear from the quotes that follow:

'Whatever you need to be, then you, you build a trust relationship with a person, and then you put money into the system that helps them grow, then you develop the development team behind that team and help them grow, help them with this stuff and never overstep that influence. You influence the relationship.' (Participant F, Male, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Operating Officer)

'But standing firm in it and also instilling the faith that the narrative – that you might not necessarily see, might not be. You might feel it's uncomfortable for you. But trust me, as your leader, that I've always got the best intention for you and the organisation. That came stronger to the forefront then prior to

the pandemic because in the chaos people want leadership.' (Participant E, Male, Millennial, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

'It was tough when you start looking at all these people; they are depending on your leadership, and you cannot let them down. You have to show that leadership; they must trust you; you must trust them; they must not lose hope; they must see, you know, encouraging them.' (Participant N, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Operations Executive)

Subtheme 1.2: Leadership and decision-making: This subtheme pertains to the ability of Christian leaders to manage the challenges arising from the pandemic. It involves making strategic decisions in alignment with Christian principles and beliefs, and utilising their faith and personal beliefs to guide their decision-making and leadership approach. The quotes are related to decisions influenced by faith or religious beliefs, such as following biblical teachings or seeking guidance from God. They offer proof of how the participants' faith influenced their leadership and decision-making styles, showing how personal faith changed the leadership style and decision-making processes of these Christian leaders. The following quotes attest to this observation:

'There are some decisions and some things that are not due, for example, I will not be corrupt, I will not just use fake data for the sake of just moving in projects, you know, so those that has really played a major role in my own work, in my decision-making processes, I would always want what is fair, what is good.' (Participant B, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Director)

'I think the other thing that was tough, and maybe, that I definitely did pray about was you worrying about the decisions you're making. So often my go-to question was: What would Jesus do in these situations?' (Participant C, Female, Millennial, Honours, Executive Head)

The code representing participants' self-assurance and bold decision-making was named *'confidence and boldness in decision-making'*. It indicates that they displayed conviction, boldness, and a readiness to take risks when making decisions. They exhibited confidence in their decisions and the capacity to overcome challenges, showing resilience against uncertainty and external pressures. This code highlights the significance of self-assurance, taking initiative in decision-making, and having the bravery to stick to and carry out those decisions. It showcases a leadership trait that allows for efficient and resolute decision-making in various professional and personal scenarios. The following quotes demonstrate this:

'I think so, for me, the feedback that I've gotten from my staff is that I have become just more decisive, more almost headstrong in my decision-making on challenging areas. Because we had to navigate a lot of challenges and being able to make our decisions.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Exco Member)

'Sometimes we don't necessarily always get it right. But people respect, in my opinion, when you are decisive and take ownership of it. Yeah. That was for me something that came quite strongly out.' (Participant F, Male, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Operating Officer)

During COVID-19, leaders faced the challenge of *balancing empathy and decisiveness*. This code represents their ability to manage the challenges of the pandemic with sensitivity while making difficult and rapid decisions. Leaders may foster a culture of trust, resilience and shared purpose by striking the right balance between empathy and decisiveness, in this way supporting their organisations to overcome difficulties and enhance the well-being of their employees. The following quotes demonstrates this:

'You get to a point where you need to understand, there's a third thing, there's the mind, the heart and the gut. I think my biggest advice is, we cannot get blasé about it, we need to have empathy, we also need to understand, we all have different circumstances, and how do you adapt?' (Participant G, Male, Millennial, Masters Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'When the pandemic started, it was really just saying that people need you to really show up as a leader, people need to – you need to be decisive, you need to be empathetic. But you need to be bold as well. Those were the key characteristics for me, during this time, being able to make very decisive decisions in areas where there was unknown, and trust in God that it would be the right thing. Being able to be the support base, fear was creeping in for people, and just creating that reassurance.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Exco Member)

'That surety is important and to be a voice of certainty was important. But also making sure that for me, I feel like I've also stepped up a lot, especially in the broader sense of empathy, saying, "I understand what people are going through".' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Executive Director)

Quotes discussing the importance of *prioritising long-term goals and values* when making decisions, even when faced with immediate challenges or pressures, are as follows:

'In the face of these immediate challenges, I had to remind myself. I have to stay true to my beliefs and values. Making those difficult decisions keeping in mind the long-term effects.' (Participant I, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Executive Director)

'But we just decided we, we can't compromise on the quality of the golf course, for instance. So we just said we're going to continue investing while all the other golf courses in the country cut their budgets down to nothing.' (Participant J, Male, Generation X, Bachelor's Degree, Managing Director)

Regarding *learning from mistakes*, the following quotes refer to participants' reflections on prior decisions that may have resulted in unfavourable outcomes and the lessons they learnt from such experiences:

'And sometimes you make the wrong decision, but you have to live with it. And if you've taken a deal from a dealer, then you have to be big enough to go back and say, "I'm sorry, but I didn't know. And this is why I've done what I've done".' (Participant A, Male, Generation X, Generation Bachelor's Degree, Chief Executive Officer)

'The past has taught me valuable lessons. I could easily just withdraw into my own world, not sharing anything with my team. This led to confusion among them. Especially now, I know

how crucial transparency is.' (Participant B, Female, Millennial, Masters Degree, Director)

'Sometimes we don't necessarily always get it right. But people respect, in my opinion, when you are decisive and take ownership of it. Yeah. That was for me something that came quite strongly out.' (Participant K, Male, Generation X, Masters Degree, Exco Member)

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate how Christian leadership competencies were perceived to impact individuals during COVID-19, with a focus on integrating faith into work. The study demonstrates that Christian business leaders' attitudes and behaviours were significantly influenced by their incorporation of faith, as suggested by Werner (2008). The leaders demonstrated empathy, compassion, and ethical decision-making, which helped create a positive work environment and cohesive culture. The study aligns with Lim's (2019) research, showing that incorporating religion into one's professional life fosters a work environment characterised by Christian values.

The leaders of this study exemplified integrity, humility, patience, and gratitude for their colleagues to follow. They demonstrated a commitment to shared values, welfare, and moral standards, consistently following the golden rule of treating others as they would like to be treated. Research by Qiu et al. (2018) emphasises the advantages of serving as a role model for others in terms of cooperation, performance, and effort.

These leaders exhibited a resolute dedication to integrity, honesty, and fairness throughout the pandemic by emphasising ethical decision-making guided by a robust moral compass rooted in their faith. Kirkpatrick (2019) emphasised the impact of Christian leadership and humility on colleagues, a notion supported by Proios and Proios (2015), who suggested that Christian ethics could be a different approach to forming ethical standards.

The study found that leaders offered emotional and spiritual support to employees during the pandemic, helping them develop coping strategies and providing opportunities for reflection and recovery. This aligns with the findings of Krehl and Büttgen (2022), who discovered that many leaders utilised different resources during the pandemic to provide support and motivation to their teams. Abbas (2023) states that these actions demonstrate effective leadership qualities in times of crisis, such as transparency, empathy, and the ability to inspire and motivate. Lynn et al. (2011) found that combining work with faith positively influences people's behaviour, with consistent patterns found across different sectors, professions, religious groups, and demographic categories.

The findings emphasise the importance of authenticity in the attitudes and values of Christian business leaders. They openly discussed personal challenges, creating a culture of trust and transparency, in line with the positive effects of authenticity on productivity and engagement in the workplace as supported by Sharp (2022).

Christian business leaders demonstrate Christ-centred leadership by actively engaging in acts of service, offering assistance, and providing resources to colleagues beyond professional expectations. They focussed on promoting the well-being of their colleagues by implementing initiatives that targeted physical, mental, and spiritual health, while also taking on mentoring responsibilities. The actions are in accordance with Christ-centred leadership principles of ethical servant leadership, focussing on serving, mentoring, and nurturing followers as outlined by Grimes and Bennett (2017). Servant leaders prioritise individual and community development, distribute power, and promote growth and peak performance (Liu, 2019).

The results indicate that these leaders promoted resilience and optimism among their colleagues by drawing on their faith-based values during challenging situations. They aimed to build a supportive network and promote optimism, hope, and determination through discussions and shared activities. Miner and Bickerton (2020) found that Christian leaders who have a strong connection with God can enhance employees' well-being by promoting teamwork in solving problems, assigning tasks with a spiritual significance, fostering a sense of organisational belonging, and showing agape love by attentively listening to concerns.

Implications for management

This study emphasises the unique characteristics of Christian leaders who incorporate their faith and values into their leadership methods, distinguishing them from secular leaders. This integration provides their leadership with a new dimension, impacting multiple aspects and surpassing mere financial success. Christian leaders derive strength from their spiritual beliefs, focussing on faith-based values and purposeful leadership. The study provides practical insights for individual leaders, organisational dynamics, and societal well-being, promoting a leadership approach based on faith, compassion, and ethical decision-making. Practical advice is given for professionals and organisations dealing with the combination of religion and leadership. Theoretical contributions involve enhancing knowledge, expanding frameworks, and enhancing understanding of the relationship between faith and leadership, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The study establishes a theoretical basis for investigating the impact of faith on crucial workplace aspects and enhancing conceptual frameworks through the identification of novel factors.

Limitations and recommendations

This study is limited as it concentrates on a particular subset of Christian business executives during the COVID-19 crisis, which may restrict its generalisability. The subjective

nature and limited sample size of 14 participants could affect the thoroughness and scope of the insights, which may be influenced by researchers' experiences and biases in self-reporting. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality or long-term effects of integrating faith into leadership practices, while geographical and cultural constraints may hinder generalisability.

Organisations should establish leadership development programmes that focus on integrating faith and values, preparing leaders to adhere to spiritual beliefs and improve the positive workplace culture. Organisational cultures that are supportive, respect religious views, and encourage open faith dialogues to help create a diverse and engaged workforce. Emphasising employee well-being with support programmes, crisis-specific policies, and work-life integration enhances productivity and resilience. Embodying Christian principles drives ethical decision-making, while embracing diverse religious beliefs leverages a range of experiences to enhance organisational impact.

Future research should incorporate longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of integrating faith on leadership practices and organisational outcomes. Comparing Christian and secular leaders could uncover distinctive ways in which faith is incorporated into leadership. Studying how faith integration is practised in different cultural contexts can offer valuable insights into the diverse effects on leadership strategies on a global scale. Additional research on workplace spirituality could improve comprehension of its impact on leadership practices, employee engagement, and organisational results. Valuing employee viewpoints provides valuable insights into their perceptions of the impact of faith integration in Christian leadership, enhancing comprehension of faith's role in promoting sustainable employee performance in various organisational settings.

Conclusions

This study uncovers the significant influence of Christian faith on the work intentions and behaviours of Christian business leaders amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysing how these leaders incorporated their religious beliefs into their work revealed valuable information about their work ethics, principles, and impact on coworkers and organisational culture. By showcasing ethical decision-making and Christ-centred leadership, these leaders established a workplace culture focussed on compassion, integrity, and service, which played a key role in the organisation's success.

By incorporating faith into their leadership strategies, these leaders were able to effectively handle pandemic obstacles with resilience, thereby positively impacting their colleagues' values and the overall workplace culture. As a result, there were notable enhancements in interpersonal relationships, job engagement, employee welfare, and a feeling of social belonging within the organisation. The study emphasised the beneficial effect of integrating faith and work on individuals. It highlighted how Christian leaders can motivate purpose,

adaptability, and excellence in the workplace through adopting a faith-centred vision and Christ-centred leadership qualities. This method provides a potent instrument for constructive change post-pandemic, creating a sustained impact that improves the well-being of employees and stakeholders. Integrating faith and leadership serves as a guiding light of hope, resilience, and lasting excellence in times of uncertainty.

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M.B. wrote the original version of the article. E.N.B. was the supervisor of the study and provided editorial inputs. R.d.B. was the co-supervisor of the study and provided editorial inputs.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, E.N.B., upon reasonable request.

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