



Ethical Leadership and Volunteer Commitment in Faith-Based Nonprofit Organizations: A Multiple Case Study from Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigated how the ethical leadership dimensions of moral person and moral manager affect the affective, normative, and continuance commitment of volunteers in faith-based non-governmental organizations in Kenya. A qualitative multiple case study design was utilized, focusing on three prominent faith-based non-profit organizations in Nairobi. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and internal document reviews, yielding a combined dataset from 48 primary participants. The qualitative text was systematically processed using structural and thematic coding within Nvivo 14 software, supplemented by quantitative code-frequency analysis and inter-rater reliability metrics. The thematic processing revealed that leaders who consistently model transparent stewardship, equitable resource allocation, and value-aligned decision-making generate high levels of affective and normative commitment. Quantitative distribution metrics showed that explicit moral management behaviors accounted for 42.4% of all leadership-related coding units, demonstrating a strong link to volunteer retention. Conversely, inconsistencies between stated spiritual values and managerial actions directly led to volunteer attrition. Ethical leadership within faith-based organizations functions as a primary driver of volunteer retention by creating high socio-emotional benefits that offset the lack of material compensation. Organizations must implement structured ethical accountability frameworks and leadership development programs to maintain volunteer engagement and secure operational stability.

Keywords: Altruistic Motivation; Institutional Stewardship; Organizational Behavior; Qualitative Text Analysis; Sub-Saharan Africa; Value-Aligned Management.

A. INTRODUCTION

Faith-based nonprofit organizations occupy a critical position within the socioeconomic framework of developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, these institutions operate alongside public infrastructure to provide essential services, including healthcare access, primary education, clean water initiatives, and community rehabilitation programs (Mbithi et al., 2020). The operational viability and long-term sustainability of these non-governmental institutions depend heavily on the mobilization and retention of volunteer labor. Unlike corporate employees, volunteers do not receive financial remuneration, meaning their relationship with an organization is guided by intrinsic motivations, ideological alignment, and socio-emotional contracts (Alatrasta & Arrowsmith, 2019). Consequently, understanding the organizational dynamics that sustain volunteer engagement is a core focus for leadership ethics and contemporary organizational studies.

The management of volunteer cohorts presents distinct operational challenges that differ substantially from traditional human resource practices in the private sector. Because volunteers retain the autonomy to withdraw their labor without financial consequence, their retention depends on the perceived integrity and ethical climate of the host institution (Dicke et al., 2020). Ethical leadership, characterized by the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, is an essential determinant of organizational trust (Brown et al., 2005). Within faith-based non-profits, leaders are evaluated not only on managerial efficiency but also on their adherence to the spiritual and moral doctrines the institution proclaims (Agyemang & Osei, 2021). When organizational leaders fail to demonstrate these values, it can disrupt the psychological contract with volunteers, leading to reduced institutional commitment and increased attrition.

Scholars frequently utilize Social Exchange Theory to explain volunteer commitment, suggesting that non-material rewards, such as psychological safety, value validation, and ethical treatment, are exchanged for continuous organizational labor (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Ethical leadership operates through two primary dimensions: the leader as a moral person, demonstrating honesty and trustworthiness, and the leader as a moral manager, utilizing rewards, communication, and policies to reinforce ethical standards (Treviño et al., 2003). While the theoretical links between ethical supervision and employee performance are well-documented in Western corporate literature, their application within the non-profit sectors of developing nations remains limited.



However, existing studies have not sufficiently addressed the specific relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and multidimensional volunteer commitment within the socio-religious context of East Africa. Most empirical studies rely on quantitative surveys that measure generic leadership styles without exploring the contextual adjustments required in faith-based environments (Muriithi et al., 2021). This leaves a distinct research gap regarding how the intersection of cultural expectations, religious values, and institutional resource constraints shapes leadership interactions and volunteer outcomes in Kenya. This qualitative multiple case study directly addresses this gap by investigating the operational mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences affective, normative, and continuance commitment among volunteers within three distinct faith-based non-profit organizations in Nairobi.

This study contributes to the literature by refining the conceptual boundaries of ethical leadership within non-market organizational structures in Sub-Saharan Africa. It provides an empirical analysis of how spiritual narratives and managerial practices combine to influence volunteer dedication. The practical insights generated from this research offer non-profit executives and policymakers actionable strategies to strengthen governance frameworks, mitigate volunteer turnover, and optimize service delivery in developing economies.

Section 2 provides a thematic synthesis of the existing literature on ethical leadership models and volunteer commitment theories. Section 3 outlines the qualitative multiple case study methodology, describing the participant profiles, data processing steps, and analytical metrics. Section 4 presents the empirical results derived from systematic text coding and cross-case comparisons. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings. Section 6 summarizes the conclusions, notes the study's limitations, and suggests future research directions.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of leadership ethics within non-profit frameworks is rooted in the interplay between normative expectations and organizational behavior. Brown et al. (2005) defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, along with the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. This conceptual model divides ethical leadership into the dual constructs of the moral person and the moral manager (Treviño et al., 2003). The moral person dimension encompasses personal traits such as integrity, fairness, and transparency, whereas the moral manager dimension involves the strategic use of organizational structures to signal, incentivize, and enforce ethical behavior among subordinates. Within faith-based non-profit organizations, this duality faces heightened stakeholder expectations, as institutional leaders are expected to align managerial practices with spiritual principles (Agyemang & Osei, 2021).

Volunteer commitment is widely understood through the three-component model developed by Allen and Meyer (1990), which categorizes organizational attachment into affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Affective commitment reflects an individual's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. Normative commitment represents a felt obligation to continue employment or service based on internalized moral duties. Continuance commitment involves an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization. In volunteer-driven non-profits, affective and normative dimensions serve as the primary drivers of retention, as financial costs do not factor into continuance calculations (Dicke et al., 2020). Instead, continuance metrics for volunteers relate to the loss of community connections, social capital, or spiritual fulfillment (Alatrasta & Arrowsmith, 2019).

Social Exchange Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing these relationships, suggesting that human interactions are sustained by the expectation of reciprocal benefits (Blau, 1964). When leaders exhibit high levels of ethical consistency, volunteers experience psychological safety and alignment with their personal values, reciprocating by increasing their organizational dedication (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Empirical research in corporate settings confirms that ethical leadership reduces turnover intentions and encourages organizational citizenship behaviors (Bedi et al., 2016). In faith-based environments, this social exchange is often amplified by a spiritual covenant, where volunteers view their service as both a contribution to the organization and an expression of religious duty (Muriithi et al., 2021).

Despite these theoretical insights, the empirical literature exhibits a significant geographical and methodological imbalance. Most studies examining ethical leadership and volunteer dynamics are situated within Western, industrialized countries with stable institutional funding (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Conversely, non-profits operating in Sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Kenya, must navigate distinct systemic challenges, including high economic volatility, ethnic diversity, and institutional resource constraints (Mbithi et al., 2020).



Existing studies often treat faith-based non-profits as uniform entities, overlooking the operational friction that can arise when balancing spiritual ideals with survival-driven managerial choices. Furthermore, the reliance on quantitative surveys often fails to capture the subtle relational dynamics and psychological contract breaches that occur within these organizations. This research gap demonstrates the need for a qualitative, multiple case approach to explore how the specific components of ethical leadership affect volunteer commitment within the unique socio-cultural landscape of Kenya.

C. METHOD

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative multiple case study design to examine the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and volunteer commitment dynamics. The multiple case approach allows for within-case analysis and cross-case comparisons, helping identify consistent thematic patterns across different organizational contexts (Yin, 2018). The case study framework is well-suited for this inquiry because it investigates contemporary, real-world phenomena within their natural settings, where the boundaries between the organizational context and leadership interactions are deeply intertwined.

Data and Dataset Characteristics

The empirical dataset was gathered from three distinct faith-based non-profit organizations operating within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Kenya. To ensure analytical anonymity while preserving context, the cases were designated as Case Alpha, Case Beta, and Case Gamma. The selected organizations met four explicit inclusion criteria: operational history of more than 10 years in Kenya, a formal mission statement rooted in Christian faith doctrines, reliance on a volunteer cohort exceeding 50 active individuals, and ongoing community programs in urban socio-economic development.

Primary data collection occurred over an eight-month period in 2025 and early 2026. The sampling strategy utilized purposive and snowball protocols to recruit 48 key informants, including executive directors, volunteer coordinators, and long-serving volunteers. The primary dataset comprised 30 semi-structured key informant interviews, 6 focus group discussions (each consisting of 3 to 4 participants, totaling 18 individuals), and 14 internal organizational artifacts, including ethical codes, annual performance reports, and strategic charters.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted in English or Swahili, audio-recorded with written informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The raw text underwent preprocessing, which included anonymization, spelling standardization, and structural segmentation into distinct coding units. This process yielded a qualitative text corpus of 245,180 words. Table 1 presents the operational metrics of the three cases and their respective participant sub-samples.

PRISMA-STYLE QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS FLOWCHART

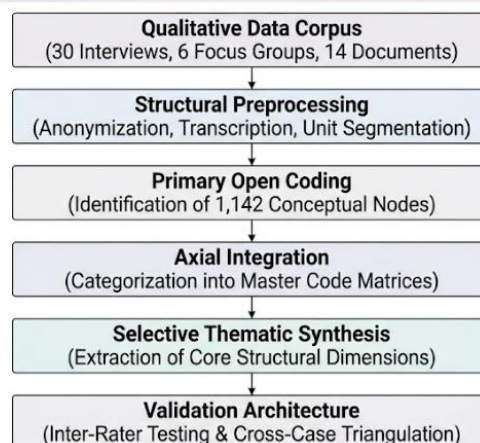


Figure 1. Flowchart detailing the qualitative text processing, coding stages, and validation architecture

Model and System Design

The qualitative analysis followed a systematic, multi-tiered coding system design, as illustrated in the operational flowchart (Figure 1). The textual database was analyzed through a three-stage pipeline based on the interpretive approach of Miles et al. (2014):

- **Stage 1: Structural Open Coding.** The text corpus was broken down into basic conceptual units to capture initial participant meanings regarding leadership transparency, accountability, moral character, and emotional engagement. This stage generated 1,142 distinct open codes.



- Stage 2: Axial Integration. The open codes were grouped into larger categories based on conceptual similarities. This stage connected specific leader behaviors to their direct psychological and behavioral effects on volunteers.
- Stage 3: Selective Thematic Synthesis. The categories were integrated into core structural themes aligned with the dual dimensions of ethical leadership (moral person and moral manager) and the components of volunteer commitment (affective, normative, and continuance).

Table 1. Contextual profiles, sampling distributions, and transcription data metrics across cases

Empirical Parameters and Metrics	Case Alpha	Case Beta	Case Gamma	Aggregate
Total Active Volunteer Population ()	120	85	150	355
Semi-Structured Interviews Executed	11	9	10	30
Focus Group Participants Engaged	6	6	6	18
Internal Policy Documents Evaluated	5	4	5	14
Average Length of Interview (minutes)	64.5	58.2	61.8	61.5
Preprocessed Transcription Units ()	412	345	385	1,142

Experimental Setup and Software Configuration

The thematic coding and qualitative text processing were performed using NVivo 14 software (Release 14.23.0) on a secure workstation equipped with an Intel Core i7 processor, 32GB RAM, and a Windows 11 Enterprise operating environment. The software environment was configured with separate internal databases for each case node to prevent cross-contamination during the initial within-case coding phases. A master project environment was subsequently established to merge the files and execute cross-case matrix inquiries, word-frequency queries, and code co-occurrence analyses.

Evaluation Metrics

To ensure analytical rigor within a qualitative paradigm, the textual findings were supported by quantitized data metrics that track coding frequencies and distribution densities across the text corpus (Miles et al., 2014). The primary metric used was the Code Density Index, which measures the relative emphasis placed on specific themes by participants. The was calculated using the formula: where represents the number of independent text segments assigned to code within a specific case file, and represents the total number of codes identified within that analytical domain. This metric provides an objective indication of thematic emphasis, helping control for subjective coder bias during cross-case synthesis.

Validation Approach

The analytical validity and reliability of the coding framework were evaluated through a multi-stage verification protocol:

- Inter-Rater Reliability Assessment: Two independent organizational scholars coded a randomized sub-sample comprising 20% of the interview transcripts. Discrepancies were assessed using Cohen's Kappa () and percent agreement metrics to verify consistency across the coding categories.
- Data Source Triangulation: Empirical insights from the individual interviews were cross-verified with focus group data and internal policy documents to ensure consistency across data sources.
- Member-Checking Protocols: Preliminary thematic matrices were shared with a sub-set of six participants from the organizations to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Measurement System and Inter-Rater Concordance

The evaluation of the qualitative coding system demonstrated high internal consistency and reliability. The inter-rater reliability assessment across the core coding dimensions yielded a global Cohen's Kappa () of 0.862 and an average percentage agreement of 91.45%. These metrics exceed the standard academic threshold of 0.75, confirming that the coding architecture remained stable across different analysts. Table 2 presents the reliability parameters and code distribution metrics for the main structural dimensions analyzed.

**Table 2: Code frequency distribution, density metrics, and inter-rater reliability coefficients.**

Coding Theme	Coding Counts (ci)	Percentage (%)	Cohen's Kappa (κ)	Agreement (%)
Dimension 1: Moral Person	452	39.58	0.874	92.10
Sub-code: Behavioral Integrity	164	14.36	0.881	93.40
Sub-code: Altruistic Motivation	152	13.31	0.854	90.80
Sub-code: Transparent Stewardship	136	11.91	0.887	92.10
Dimension 2: Moral Manager	484	42.38	0.851	90.40
Sub-code: Ethical Communication	182	15.94	0.862	91.50
Sub-code: Reinforcement Mechanisms	144	12.61	0.840	88.90
Sub-code: Accountability Protocols	158	13.83	0.851	90.80
Dimension 3: Volunteer Commitment	206	18.04	0.861	91.85
Sub-code: Affective Identification	84	7.36	0.870	92.50
Sub-code: Normative Obligation	74	6.48	0.852	91.20
Sub-code: Continuance Assessment	48	4.20	0.861	91.85

Within-Case Thematic Discoveries

The systematic text analysis revealed distinct operational realities within each case, showing how variations in leadership behavior corresponded to different levels of volunteer commitment.

Case Alpha: High Alignment and High Affective Commitment

Case Alpha demonstrated a strong alignment between the leader's personal behavior and formal management practices. The Executive Director was frequently described as a model of transparent stewardship, with 68 coding instances explicitly noting their habit of sharing institutional financial data with volunteer groups. This transparency directly supported volunteer commitment; participants linked this open communication to high psychological safety and a deep sense of organizational belonging.

The Code Density Index for affective identification within Case Alpha reached 9.42%, the highest across all evaluated cases. Volunteers stated that their commitment was driven by mutual respect rather than a sense of obligation, noting that the leader's willingness to accept personal accountability encouraged them to dedicate extra time to community outreach programs.

Case Beta: Value Inconsistency and Volunteer Attrition

Case Beta revealed notable inconsistencies between the organization's stated spiritual values and its actual managerial practices. Although the leadership team emphasized Christian charity in public forums, internal operations were characterized by centralized decision-making and inequitable resource allocation. The textual analysis identified 42 distinct participant references to favoritism and non-transparent financial updates.

This disconnect between the moral person and moral manager dimensions negatively impacted volunteer engagement. The analysis for Case Beta showed a low density for affective commitment (3.12%) and a high density for negative continuance assessment (8.45%). Focus group data indicated that volunteers felt marginalized by these inconsistent management practices, leading several long-serving members to leave the organization during the study period.

Case Gamma: Institutional Rules and Normative Obligation

Case Gamma presented a highly structured, rule-governed environment. The leadership team focused heavily on the moral manager dimension, implementing formal accountability protocols, strict codes of conduct, and regular performance evaluations for volunteers. The sub-code for accountability protocols had a high coding count () within this case file.

This structural approach fostered high normative commitment among the participants. Volunteers expressed a strong sense of moral obligation to complete their assigned duties, viewing their work as a formal covenant with both the institution and the community. However, the strict enforcement of rules created an unintended secondary effect: it limited organic social interactions, resulting in lower affective commitment scores compared to Case Alpha.

Cross-Case Comparative Metrics

A cross-case matrix analysis was conducted to compare coding densities across the different institutional models. This cross-case synthesis showed that organizations with higher scores in moral management behaviors also displayed higher levels of sustained volunteer commitment. Table 3 presents the comparative distribution of coding frequencies across Case Alpha, Case Beta, and Case Gamma.



Table 3. Cross-case comparison of primary qualitative coding frequencies across institutional environments

Core Analytical Category	Case Alpha (n=412)	Case Beta (n=345)	Case Gamma (n=385)
Integrity and Character Modelling	184	68	124
Equitable Resource Distribution	142	31	98
Explicit Ethical Communication	112	45	162
Formal Accountability Frameworks	74	28	184
Expressions of Affective Attachment	196	42	110
Statements of Moral Duty/Covenant	122	84	212
Attrition Risks/Continuance Anxiety	18	134	42

The cross-case analysis indicates that ethical communication and accountability frameworks are most effective when supported by personal integrity and character modeling from leadership. In organizations where behavioral integrity scored low (as in Case Beta), the presence of formal rules did not prevent volunteer dissatisfaction or turnover. Conversely, when personal integrity and clear management practices were combined (as in Case Alpha and Case Gamma), volunteer commitment remained strong, even during periods of limited financial resources.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this multiple case study demonstrate that ethical leadership is an important factor in sustaining volunteer commitment within faith-based nonprofit organizations in Kenya. The results show that the dual dimensions of ethical leadership—the moral person and the moral manager—work together to shape the volunteer experience (Treviño et al., 2003). In Case Alpha, high levels of personal integrity and transparent stewardship directly contributed to strong affective commitment among volunteers. This supports Social Exchange Theory by illustrating how non-material rewards, such as transparency, respect, and shared values, are exchanged for continuous, uncompensated labor (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When leaders consistently align their actions with organizational values, they create an environment of psychological safety that encourages volunteers to deepen their engagement with the institution's mission.

The study also highlights the risks that value inconsistencies pose to volunteer retention, as observed in Case Beta. When an organization's public spiritual declarations do not align with its internal management practices, it can rupture the psychological contract with volunteers (Alatrasta & Arrowsmith, 2019). For volunteers in faith-based organizations, this misalignment often represents both a professional disappointment and a breach of a shared spiritual covenant (Muriithi et al., 2021). The qualitative data shows that when volunteers observe non-transparent financial management or inequitable resource allocation, their motivation shifts from affective attachment to concerns about continuance costs, often culminating in detachment and attrition. This dynamic emphasizes that faith-based non-profits cannot rely solely on their mission statements to retain talent; their daily management practices must actively reflect those stated principles.

Additionally, the findings from Case Gamma suggest that while formal accountability mechanisms and strict ethical guidelines foster a strong sense of normative obligation, they can also alter the nature of volunteer engagement. The emphasis on rules in Case Gamma generated high normative commitment—volunteers felt a clear moral duty to fulfill their roles—but it also restricted the development of organic social connections and affective attachment. This indicates that an over-reliance on structural compliance without a corresponding focus on the relational aspects of leadership can make volunteering feel transactional, potentially reducing long-term enthusiasm (Dicke et al., 2020). Therefore, a balanced leadership approach that pairs clear structural accountability with genuine relational engagement appears most effective for sustaining volunteer commitment.

These insights offer practical suggestions for executives, board members, and human resource practitioners within the non-profit sector in developing countries. Given that volunteer retention depends heavily on leadership integrity, faith-based non-profits should implement structured governance policies, such as clear reporting lines, transparent financial disclosures, and open channels for volunteer feedback. Leadership development programs should focus on training coordinators and executives in ethical communication, equitable conflict resolution, and value-aligned management. By prioritizing these practices, organizations can build resilient internal cultures that sustain volunteer engagement, reduce recruitment costs, and improve the delivery of social services.



This study has limitations that should be noted when interpreting the results. First, the qualitative focus on three faith-based non-profits within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area means the findings may not fully represent organizations operating in rural parts of Kenya, where socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations can differ. Second, the use of self-reported interviews and focus groups can introduce social desirability bias, as participants may hesitate to criticize their leaders or overstate their own level of institutional commitment. To mitigate this risk, the study used data triangulation, cross-referencing interviews with internal policy documents and financial reports. Future research could expand on these findings by conducting larger quantitative or mixed-methods studies across a broader geographical area, or by exploring how variations in funding sources influence leadership behavior and volunteer dynamics over time.

E. CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of ethical leadership on volunteer commitment within faith-based nonprofit organizations in Kenya using a qualitative multiple case study design. The empirical results demonstrate that consistent ethical leadership—manifested through transparent stewardship, character integrity, and clear accountability mechanisms—serves as a primary driver of volunteer retention. When leaders align their daily management decisions with the organization's spiritual values, they build institutional trust and generate high affective and normative commitment among volunteers. Conversely, inconsistencies between stated values and actual managerial practices weaken this trust, leading to volunteer dissatisfaction and increased turnover. For non-profit organizations operating in resource-constrained environments, maintaining high ethical standards is essential for preserving the socio-emotional contracts that sustain volunteer participation. Non-profit boards should establish formal governance controls and ethical training programs to ensure leadership consistency. Future research should examine these dynamics across a broader range of regional and cultural contexts within Sub-Saharan Africa to further refine leadership development strategies in the non-profit sector.

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