



Burnout, and Staying Power: A Qualitative Study of Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Leadership Resilience During Crisis

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores why certain leaders remained in their roles during the COVID-19 crisis and how organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), perceived organizational support (POS), and personal faith contributed to their staying power. Six leaders from diverse U.S. sectors described rapid change, isolation, blurred home and work boundaries, and emotional strain. Thematic analysis revealed four core influences on persistence: faith as a source of moral grounding and stability; altruistic concern for others; the disciplined maintenance of standards despite uneven support; and integrity-based decision making within an individualistic culture. Participants continued to enact behaviors associated with OCB, including reliability, compassion, constructive engagement, and responsible organizational involvement. Faith practices helped reframe adversity, supported coping, and reinforced identity alignment. The findings suggest that leader persistence relies more on spiritual grounding, moral meaning, and relational commitment than on external incentives. Organizations are encouraged to acknowledge moral labor, strengthen community, and cultivate supportive environments that protect the best interests of leaders. The study highlights implications for supporting leaders' moral labor and well-being.

Keywords: Leadership retention, organizational citizenship behavior, faith and resilience, burnout, perceived organizational support

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Introduction

Crises often require leaders to respond to responsibilities that exceed formal role descriptions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders managed operational upheaval, diminished interpersonal connection, and deteriorating work–life boundaries. Although existing research frequently explains burnout or attrition, there is less emphasis on understanding the leaders who choose to remain and on the factors that sustain their resilience. In 1988, Organ theorized an elaborate definition of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) based on empirical research introduced the term “good soldier syndrome”. This term described OCB as being related to engagement in extra-role activities, punctuality, prosocial behaviors, helping others, and volunteering. Organ’s extended taxonomy included individual altruism, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue as dimensions of OCB. Organ’s efforts resulted in the terms “discretionary” and “non-contractual” being posited as descriptive as opposed to definitive.

This study examines staying power as a form of discretionary, values-based leadership that resonates with established OCB research. Prior studies show that OCB often reflects identity commitments, intrinsic motivation, and relational responsibility. POS may reinforce these behaviors when support is consistent, although it can also weaken them when support is uneven or absent. Building on McKinnon (2022), the present study investigates how faith, meaning, and moral purpose shaped leaders’ willingness to stay during a prolonged crisis. In faith-integrated environments, spirituality is not peripheral. It influences ethical reasoning, coping practices, and the interpretation of leadership work. These connections guide the present investigation.

Perceived organizational support (POS) has been shown to influence OCB and burnout, but its impact under conditions of prolonged crisis is less clear (Duffy & Lilly, 2013; Wang & Wang, 2020). Leaders may continue to demonstrate citizenship behaviors even when support is inconsistent, drawing on other sources of resilience such as identity, purpose, and faith. Building on McKinnon (2022), the present study explores how faith, moral meaning, and OCB intersect in the stories of leaders who remained in their roles during the COVID-19 crisis. In faith-integrated settings, spirituality is not peripheral but central to ethical reasoning, coping, and leadership identity. This connection shapes how leaders interpret adversity and how they respond to sustained pressure.

Although extensive research has examined burnout, turnover, and leadership attrition during organizational crises, little is known about why some leaders choose to remain despite sudden and prolonged adversity. Existing Organization Citizenship Behavior (OCB), and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) research focused primarily on discretionary workplace behaviors or organizational influences on employee outcomes. These perspectives provide a partial explanation for sustained leadership endurance during a crisis. However, the literature has not adequately examined how personal faith, faith practices, moral purpose, and organizational citizenship behaviors interact to support leaders’ resilience and commitment during extended periods of challenges and disruptions. Therefore, the research was framed by the following:

- How do leaders describe the factors that enabled them to remain in leadership roles during the COVID-19 crisis despite experiencing burnout and adversity?

Supporting questions:

- How do leaders describe the influence of Organizational Citizenship Behavior on their decision to remain in leadership?
- How do leaders perceive the role of Organizational Support in sustaining leadership during crisis?
- How do leaders describe the influence of faith and spiritual practices on their resilience and leadership persistence?

Literature Review

Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Crisis

OCB refers to discretionary, prosocial behaviors that contribute to organizational functioning beyond formal role requirements (Organ, 1988, 1997). These behaviors include helping colleagues, maintaining high standards, showing initiative, and supporting organizational goals. Meta-analytic work has linked OCB to a range of positive outcomes, including performance, cohesion, and effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 2009; Lavine, 2012).

During crisis, OCB takes on distinct characteristics. Leaders may increase informal support, communication, and problem-solving to stabilize teams and systems (Bundy et al., 2017; Boin, 2009). At the same time, sustained extra-role effort can intensify fatigue and burnout, especially when resources are limited or support is uneven (Bolino et al., 2014; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Perceived Organizational Support, Burnout, and Retention

POS describes employees' perceptions of how much the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Duffy & Lilly, 2013; Wang & Wang, 2020). Higher POS is generally associated with reduced burnout, stronger commitment, and greater OCB. In crisis contexts, however, organizational structures may be strained, communication fragmented, and support inconsistent.

Research on COVID-19 has shown that disrupted boundaries, increased workload, and prolonged uncertainty contributed to heightened work-life conflict and stress (Schieman et al., 2021). Leaders who feel responsible for others while also feeling unsupported may experience tension between their internal sense of duty and their perception of organizational backing.

Faith, Identity, and Leadership

Faith can function as a reservoir of meaning, identity, and resilience. Studies have shown that religious or spiritual frameworks help individuals interpret suffering, cope with uncertainty, and sustain hope in crisis (Kowalczyk et al., 2020). In leadership contexts, faith-informed perspectives shape ethical considerations, relational commitments, and long-term endurance (Greenleaf, 1998; Patterson, 2004). Identity theory suggests that individuals strive to act consistently with their internalized role identities, such as "servant leader," "pastor," or "protector" (Burke & Stets, 2009). Leaders grounded in faith often view their roles as expressions of calling, which can make staying in difficult circumstances an issue of integrity and fulfillment of purpose rather than convenience. These examples represent only a few of the substantial number of influential studies that have found religion to be an important determinant of human and organizational behaviors.

Theoretical Orientation

The study draws on phenomenology to explore the views and perspectives of leadership based on their lived experiences, OCB, and faith during crisis (Moustakas, 1994; Gill, 2014; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This approach supports deep examination of how leaders interpret their persistence, how they experience burnout, and how their spiritual commitments and perceptions of support inform decisions to remain.

Method

Model and Design of the Research

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to examine how leaders made sense of staying in their roles during the COVID-19 crisis. Phenomenology focuses on participants' lived experience and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Gill, 2014). The study followed a process of bracketing, careful reading, coding, and theme development. Principles from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis supported the movement from coded segments to clearly articulated themes.

The Population, Sample, or Study Group

The study group consisted of six leaders identified through purposeful sampling. Each participant was recognized by colleagues as someone who consistently exceeded core job expectations and continued in their role through the pandemic. Leaders represented a range of sectors, including creative ministry-related work, food distribution oversight, vocational training, higher education administration, congregational administration, and pastoral ministry. Four participants were male and two were female. Leadership tenure ranged from 2 to 30 years and most participants were based in the Southern or Midwestern United States.

Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1. The focus was not on statistical representation but on depth of experience and insight into OCB, faith, and staying power during crisis.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participants	Leadership Tenure	Gender	Age	Job Industry	Location
P1	2	Female	25-35	Film	Southern U.S.
P2	25	Male	55-65	Food distribution	Southern U.S.
P3	30	Male	55-65	Vocational training	Midwestern U.S.
P4	10	Male	55-65	Higher education	Southern U.S.
P5	10	Female	50-60	Administration	Southern U.S.
P6	10	Male	55-65	Ministry	Southern U.S.

Source: Adapted from McKinnon, C. E. (2022). *Why leaders stay instead of quitting: A qualitative exploration of organizational citizenship behavior amid crises* (Order No. 29061166) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Data Collection Tool and Data Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted during the COVID-19 context, when leaders were still navigating crisis-related pressures. Interviews invited participants to describe:

- Why they remained in their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- Why they tend to engage in extra role behaviors,
- Their perceptions of organizational support,
- The role of faith and spiritual practices in coping and decision making, and
- How the pandemic affected their sense of calling, burnout, and resilience.

The participant pool consisted of six leaders who 1) displayed strong OCB traits, 2) worked in leadership role ranging from one to more than 20 years, 3) worked for an organization in the United States during the COVID19 pandemic. Participants received an overview of OCB based on foundational literature. Interviews were conducted online and consisted of 22 open-ended questions. Participants were informed of anonymity to encourage candor. Semi-structured and in-depth questions were implemented to facilitate conversational style discussions about employment topics related to the research questions.

Interview questions invited leaders to describe the origins of their tendency to exceed expected responsibilities. Interview recording and audio files were transcribed to text. The resulting text was tallied and coded manually. Coding was conducted by the principal investigator. Credibility was enhanced through iterative review of transcripts, maintenance of an audit trail, reflexive practices, and committee oversight throughout the research process. Coding was implemented to identify and extract emerging themes. Through axial coding, raw data were sampled yielding consistent codes and categories for assessment. commonly associated with OCB and supported the validity of selecting them as participants. Initial coding captured key phrases related to faith, burnout, OCB, support, responsibility, and identity. Codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, including “faith and stability”, “altruism and care for others”, “support and standards”, and “integrity and responsibility”. Table 2

summarizes emerging themes and codes groupings. Prominent emerging themes consisted of upbringing, care for others, ambition, and commitment to mission. These attributes aligned with OCB behaviors.

Validity and Reliability

Several steps were taken to support rigor and trustworthiness:

- **Methodological alignment:** The phenomenological design matched the research problem, which focused on meaning and lived experience.
- **Transparent coding:** Codes and themes were clearly documented, with illustrative phrases and counts (e.g., frequency tags such as T-Resilience, C-Faith).
- **Theoretical coherence:** The analysis drew on established frameworks in phenomenology, OCB, burnout, and identity theory (Moustakas, 1994; Organ, 1988, 1997; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2009).
- **Consistency checks:** Themes were compared against transcripts to ensure they reflected participant narratives rather than researcher expectations.

The study does not claim generalizability but aims for depth, clarity, and coherence in the analytic process.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher approached the topic with prior scholarly interest in OCB, faith-integrated leadership, and crisis experiences (McKinnon, 2022). Bracketing procedures were used to reduce the influence of prior assumptions. During analysis, the researcher focused on participants' language, emphasizing direct descriptions of staying, faith, burnout, and responsibility. The researcher's role was interpretive but grounded in the discipline of returning repeatedly to the data and to the guiding research questions.

Ethical Information

The study followed standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used in reporting; identifying details were minimized. The research complied with institutional expectations for ethical review applicable at the time of collection of data.

Findings

Four themes describe the factors that shaped leaders' persistence during the COVID-19 crisis: (1) faith as the foundation for moral and emotional stability, (2) altruism and concern for others, (3) support, community, and disciplined standards, and (4) integrity and responsibility within an individualistic culture.

Faith as the Foundation for Moral and Emotional Stability

Faith emerged as the central grounding force in participants' accounts. Leaders framed their work as part of a spiritual calling rather than a purely professional assignment. Prayer, scripture, and reflection served as anchors during uncertain and isolating periods. Faith helped leaders interpret hardship as meaningful rather than random, and service as an expression of obedience and purpose.

This spiritual orientation guided moral reasoning and stabilized emotions. Leaders described faith as "steadyng," "centering," or "clarifying." It provided a framework for deciding when to stay, how to act, and what to prioritize. The connection between faith and leadership identity made leaving feel inconsistent with their sense of calling, even when strain and fatigue were high.

Altruism and Concern for Others

A second major theme was altruistic concern for others. Leaders expressed strong responsibility for the welfare of their teams, clients, and communities. They increased communication, offered emotional support, adjusted expectations, and tried to protect others from the worst effects of the crisis.

This concern aligned closely with OCB-related behaviors such as helping, civic virtue, and conscientiousness (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2009). Participants emphasized that care for others—not self-preservation—was often the driving reason for staying. Leaving would have felt like abandonment. Remaining became an expression of loyalty.

Support, Community, and the Discipline of Maintaining Standards

Perceived organizational support influenced how leaders experienced the crisis. When support was present—through clear communication, resources, or collegial solidarity—it helped buffer fatigue. When support was inconsistent, leaders often compensated with personal discipline and internal standards. They maintained thoroughness, fairness, and accountability even when they felt undersupported.

This balance reflects a complex relationship between POS and OCB. Participants did not passively mirror organizational treatment. Instead, they drew on internalized values and faith-based convictions to sustain extra-role effort. Community support from peers, teams, or informal networks also contributed to their staying power.

Integrity and Responsibility in an Individualistic Culture

In the broader U.S. context, participants recognized high individual mobility and autonomy. They knew they could leave, change jobs, or step back. Yet they chose to remain. This decision was framed in terms of responsibility, integrity, and identity alignment.

Leaders described staying as “the right thing,” an act of honoring commitments and living consistently with their values. This sense of agency distinguished their persistence from mere endurance. Remaining was not framed as passive resignation but as an active choice tied to personal and spiritual convictions.

Emerging themes and codes extracted from the research data concerning fatigue, faith, faith practices, and the decision to persevere through crisis in an individualistic culture are presented in Table 2:

Table 2.

Emerging Themes and Codes

Fatigue, burnout, and leaders' OCB	OCB fatigue and POS in a crisis	Individualistic culture, POS, and OCB in a crisis	Faith, faith practices, and coping in a crisis	Faith, faith practices, and leading in a crisis
T-Isolation (5)	T-Support (17)	T-Independence (6)	T-Faith (7)	T-Faith (5)
C-Isolated (5)	C-Support (17)	C-Independent (6)	C-Faith (7)	C-Faith (5)
T-Commitment (6)	T-Change (5)	T-Commitment (15)	T-Commitment (5)	T-Care for others (6)
C-Committed (6)	C-Challenges (3)	C-Unfazed (6)	C-Unfazed (3)	C-Care for others (6)
T-Invasion (3)	C-Isolated (2)	C-Committed (6)	C-Committed (2)	C-Care for others (6)
C-Invasive (3)	T-Self-motivation (10)	C-Team (3)	Empowerment (8)	T- Support (6)
T-Resilience (19)	C-Self-motivated (10)	T-Freedom (5)	C-Empowerment (8)	C-Support (6)
C-Unfazed (8)		C-Freedom (5)		T-Spiritual Influence (5)
C-Motivated (3)		T-Empowerment (13)		C-Influence (5)
C-Benefit (3)	T-Team (8)	C-Support (2)		T-Ethics (4)
C-Faith (2)	C-Care for Others (4)	C-Empowered (6)		C-Ethics (2)
C-Coping (3)		C-Job change (3)		C-Diligent (2)
T-Care for Others (15)	C-Team (4)	C-Benefit (2)		
C-Team (2)	T-Diligence (11)	T-Introspective (8)		
C-Care for Others (10)	C-Diligent (7)	C-Faith (3)		
C-Emotional (3)	C-Faith (4)	C-Apprehension (3)		
		C-Regard (2)		

Note. T = Theme, C = Code. Source: Adapted from McKinnon, C. E. (2022). *Why leaders stay instead of quitting: A qualitative exploration of organizational citizenship behavior amid crises* (Order No. 29061166) [Doctoral dissertation, Regent University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions

The findings reaffirm earlier work on faith-informed OCB and leadership endurance. Leaders in this study remained because their work was grounded in faith, identity alignment, and relationships. Faith redefined stress as purposeful service and provides both psychological steadiness and ethical direction. Although POS influenced their experience, it did not determine persistence. Leaders upheld high standards because of internal convictions rather than external validation. According to Gaitho (2019), the role of religion in uniting and guiding humanity cannot be ignored. Religion plays a major role in culture, economics, politics, and social life. Leadership styles are key areas where religion manifests—indicating a significant relationship between religious beliefs and the dimensions of leadership styles (p. 8). Pirutinsky et al. (2020) posited that religiosity provides a source of social support, increased self-control, and gratitude that includes practices such as prayer, meditation, study and mindfulness that is linked to lower negative impact. Organ's (1988, 1997) OCB dimensions: altruism, contentiousness, sportsmanship, courtesy, and civic virtue were demonstrated by leader/participants in extenuating circumstances. The influence of these dimensions appeared to override expected responses to crisis such as burnout, and turnover per previous research findings.

This study contributes to OCB literature by showing how discretionary behaviors are sustained under prolonged crisis. Participants described helping others, maintaining reliability, responding constructively to challenges, and engaging responsibly in organizational life. Although prolonged crises can increase the risk of depletion, the leaders in this study adapted their behaviors and occasionally heightened their discretionary efforts. This suggests that meaning, spirituality, and relational loyalty were notably influential to these behaviors.

Conceptually, the study suggests that faith functions as a resilience mechanism that integrates identity, ethics, and purpose. Leaders described their persistence as part of a moral and spiritual calling, which positioned endurance as an act of integrity. This connection may be especially relevant in faith-based organizations, where spiritual formation and leadership identity are closely linked.

Faith functioned as a stabilizing force, linking identity, ethics, and purpose (Kowalczyk et al., 2020; Burke & Stets, 2009). It redefined stress as meaningful service and positioned endurance as an expression of integrity. OCB behaviors—such as helping, reliability, and constructive engagement—were interpreted as natural outcomes of calling and responsibility, rather than optional extras.

POS influenced leaders' experiences of strain but did not fully determine persistence (Duffy & Lilly, 2013; Wang & Wang, 2020). Participants continued to uphold standards and care for others despite uneven or limited support. This suggests that internal motivations and identity commitments can sustain OCB even when organizational structures are under strain.

Suggestions for Practice

- **Acknowledge moral and emotional labor.** Organizations should recognize that leaders carry significant psychological and ethical burdens during crisis. Space for reflection, mentoring, and peer support can help sustain them.
- **Strengthen community and shared purpose.** Clear values, fair processes, and relational cohesion contribute to resilience.
- **Provide essential support and realistic expectations.** Practical resources, clear communication, and manageable workloads help ensure that leaders' efforts have constructive impact.
- **Distribute responsibilities.** Shared or rotating leadership can reduce exhaustion and preserve capacity.
- **Protect boundaries.** Organizations should help leaders re-establish healthy work-home rhythms, particularly in hybrid or remote contexts.

Staying power in crisis emerged as more than survival; it was an ethical and spiritual stance. Leaders continued to lead in crisis because doing so aligned with their faith, identity, and responsibility to others. Organizations that support these dimensions are more likely to retain committed, resilient leaders through periods of uncertainty. Leadership endurance arises from conviction, relationships, and purpose. Organizations that cultivate these elements are more likely to retain capable and spiritually grounded leaders.

Limitations

This study involved a small, purposively selected sample from U.S. contexts and faith-integrated roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenological data relied on retrospective accounts and self-report. Faith and faith practices emerged as a dynamic component contributing to moral duty and staying power; however, the findings cannot be generalized statistically and may not reflect experiences in non-faith-based or strongly collectivist cultures. The focus on leaders identified as already inclined toward OCB may also limit applicability to broader leadership populations.

Disclosure Statements

Contribution rate statement of the researchers:

The author is the sole contributor to this study.

Conflict of interest statement:

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Cherie |MCKINNON: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing – review & editing.

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Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval

In this research, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed.