

## Ethical Leadership in Crisis Management and its Impact on Faculty and Staff Trust and Organizational Commitment in Private Universities in Babylon Governorate During Social and Economic Upheaval

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors during crises and their impact on employee trust and organizational commitment within private universities in Babylon Governorate, Iraq. The study examines how university owners navigate societal and economic upheavals while maintaining ethical standards and fostering institutional resilience. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 120 faculty members and administrative staff across 4 private universities in Babylon Governorate. SPSS software was utilized to analyze the relationships between ethical leadership dimensions, employee trust, and organizational commitment. The findings reveal significant positive correlations between ethical leadership behaviors and both employee trust ( $r = .78, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $r = .82, p < .01$ ). The study identifies transparency, integrity, and empathy as critical leadership behaviors that significantly influence employee perceptions during crises. These results contribute to the growing literature on crisis leadership in educational contexts and provide practical implications for university administrators in regions experiencing instability. The research underscores the importance of ethical leadership as a foundation for institutional resilience and suggests that ethical leadership development should be prioritized within higher education institutions operating in challenging environments.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the face of today's special global challenges, ethical leadership in crisis management is a matter of life and death. More and more ethics is necessary to sustain operations. Determined just recently Lakeshore Education, whether through direct action or full operation maintenance of other institutions. He reached these conclusions depended on a group of special volumes call Teacher's Manuals. In China, if one gets in the room that conducts exams but does not approach guys who assign work in all likelihood graduate. One aim of this book is to bring together literature actually accessible to scholars in the West who are curious. In 1988, the Ministry of Education sent the Awards Planning Office to each province, autonomous region and municipality under State Council control looking for documents and materials relating to award-winning teachers. Sultans, emperors and eminent domain officials by any name have earned their rewards when power or Olympic silver stars. They have always shown such heavy respect for both shanzhai and punishment as to lace all the toys. Alas, the part of community-based division of labors and management that uses the state sector to extract wholesale prices for fresh electricians as hidden form of tribute) restructuring without mismanagement; uncertain order at least different orders. In these transitional, chaotic times "Ethical Leadership" is an external countermeasure that a subject has his personal actions and interpersonal relations correct and because of which correct and wrong conduct are clearly defined at different levels. As a result, the college faces a completely different set of management difficulties against this mad, topsy-turvy world just to maintain a normal, stable life. (Translated and edited by: Liang Zhiing) Any settlement must respect fair judges (Magar Natou). That power not be all against us. If the Zhang Report Has left us in the lurch once

again apparently the results were negative In these times therefore, "ethical leadership" implies both correct personal actions and correct interpersonal relations, and encourages such conduct throughout followers by two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005).

In the future, the most important issue for how the organization to deal with crises of both kinds will be a crisis Stakeholders were hanging in suspense and Their supervisors desired to conduct business in an ethical and correct manner. Ethical guidance and their understanding of Ta-shih will now help establish their choice The decisions of top leaders when they find themselves under such circumstances will from time to turn into diamonds Whether the trust foundation of organizations is strong or fragile When there are other possible paths open, it is interesting research to consider what effect these decisions might have Babylon Governorate is home to a number of special-scale private universities as well. Their difficulties come from a bewildering number of different sources: the local little upsets that arise from larger setbacks in society (and of course this is really just giving away local people's money); pressures to cut off their capital streams and lie about the number of students they enroll, regulations piled upon them almost anywhere one turns around not only from outside but also by inside rivals working at Within that geographic area it should be mentioned that the institutions we are discussing in this book are higher education and vocational training institutes. Therefore, the school-owner--who is in fact their investor--has multiple sets of stakeholders to take into account every time he or she makes any tough decisions It that will determine what future lies in store for these institutions and how people beneath their roofs--be they students, teachers or other employees of different sorts--can expect to be treated (Ameen et al. 2019) This study is an exploration of the private university owner's behavior when at crisis in Babylon Governorate. It analyzes how this influences academic staff trust and loyalty from administrative employees on research into crisis management in higher education-centric settings or other similar contexts. By focusing upon such a specific regional situation, we aim to offer our contribution towards a revisiting of theory and theory-building in crisis management for other educational institutions. Our conclusions are likely also of use to traditional universities Problems faced with development strategies governance structures as crises become more probable at an institution of higher education that is in a similar state--both internally as well as with environmental factors inside and out. As can be seen from the recent research, its findings will open the way for exchange of experiences between systems, answer questions about technique related to governance for administrators and leaders such as leadership training provision--as well offering some hints on preparing for when a crisis does break out among universities after all, they are the beginning of a long process. A little step which nonetheless gives great promise for taking the broader picture--however little it may be--in hand One goal in future theoretical research will likely be to disassemble these topics analysis by point of focus, drifting on from above, down along each particular scale---not only from society as a whole but all the way down to each and every single enterprise--one must made a little more thoroughly thought through review of what will develop in relationship of management system courses with this issue. (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi 2018).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Ethical Leadership in Crisis Management

Ethical leadership has gained substantial attention in organizational literature over the past two decades. Brown et al. (2005) pioneered the conceptualization of ethical leadership as a distinct construct, differentiating it from related concepts such as authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, and transformational leadership. Their work established ethical leadership as comprising two key components: the moral person (demonstrating traits like integrity and trustworthiness) and the moral manager (role-modeling ethical conduct and setting clear ethical standards).

In crisis contexts, ethical leadership takes on heightened significance. Boulu-Reshef et al (2019) argue that crises serve as "moral stress tests" for organizations and their leaders, revealing underlying values and ethical foundations. During such periods, leaders face increased scrutiny and must make decisions with significant consequences under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure. Research by Clapp-Smith, et al (2009) indicates that ethical leadership during crises is characterized by transparency, consistency, consideration of stakeholder interests, and moral courage.

The relationship between ethical leadership and crisis outcomes has been examined in various sectors. In healthcare, studies have shown that ethical leadership during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with better staff well-being and organizational performance (Gao & Gao, 2024). In business contexts, ethical leadership during economic downturns has been linked to greater organizational resilience and faster recovery (Janovac & Virijević, 2022).

Within higher education, research on ethical leadership during crises remains relatively limited. Most studies have focused on crisis communication strategies (Ulmer et al, 2022) or general leadership approaches during specific events like campus emergencies (Sunderman et al , 2020). Few studies have specifically examined the ethical dimensions of leadership in private universities during periods of broader societal and economic upheaval.

### 2.2. Employee Trust in Leadership

Trust represents a fundamental element in leader-follower relationships and organizational effectiveness. Rousseau et al (1998) define trust as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of

the intentions or behavior of another" (p. 395). In organizational contexts, trust in leadership has been consistently linked to positive outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and performance (Colquitt et al, 2007).

During crises, trust becomes particularly crucial as employees face increased uncertainty and vulnerability. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) identify two primary bases of trust in leadership: relational (based on the quality of leader-follower relationships) and cognitive (based on perceptions of leader competence and reliability). Research by Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007) suggests that during crises, the relational dimension of trust becomes more salient, as employees seek reassurance and emotional support from leaders.

In higher education contexts, trust in leadership has been associated with faculty engagement, institutional loyalty, and willingness to support organizational change (Harris et al, 2023). However, studies examining trust in leadership within private universities in crisis contexts remain scarce, particularly in regions experiencing significant instability.

### 2.3. Organizational Commitment in Crisis Contexts

Organizational commitment, defined as "a psychological state that characterizes the employee's relationship with the organization and has implications for the decision to continue membership in the organization" (Malaysia, 2011), represents a critical outcome variable in organizational research. The three-component model of organizational commitment distinguishes between affective commitment (emotional attachment), continuance commitment (perceived costs of leaving), and normative commitment (sense of obligation).

Research by Hirschi et al (2020) indicates that during crises, organizational commitment tends to fluctuate based on leadership actions, organizational communication, and perceived fairness of decision-making. Studies in various sectors have shown that ethical leadership positively influences organizational commitment, particularly affective commitment, by fostering a sense of shared values and purpose (Bedi, et al , 2016).

In higher education, organizational commitment has been linked to faculty retention, performance, and institutional effectiveness (White-Lewis, 2022). However, the specific factors that influence organizational commitment among employees in private universities during periods of societal and economic upheaval remain underexplored.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Based on the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework linking ethical leadership behaviors during crises to employee trust and organizational commitment (Choi, 2020).. The framework suggests that specific ethical leadership behaviors (transparency, integrity, empathy, fairness, and moral guidance) influence both employee trust in leadership and organizational commitment, with trust potentially mediating the relationship between leadership and commitment.

The following research hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership behaviors during crises and employee trust in leadership among private university employees in Babylon Governorate.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership behaviors during crises and organizational commitment among private university employees in Babylon Governorate.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between employee trust in leadership and organizational commitment among private university employees in Babylon Governorate.

H4: Employee trust in leadership mediates the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors during crises and organizational commitment among private university employees in Babylon Governorate.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between ethical leadership behaviors, employee trust, and organizational commitment among private university employees in Babylon Governorate. The design was chosen for its efficiency in collecting data from multiple respondents and its suitability for testing hypothesized relationships between variables (Harris et al, 2023).

### 4.2. Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of faculty members and administrative staff employed at private universities in Babylon Governorate. At the time of the study, there were 5 private universities operating in the governorate, with a total employee population of approximately 2000 individuals.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select participants. First, 4 of the 5 private universities were randomly selected to ensure representation across different institution sizes and specializations. Within each selected university, participants were stratified by position type (faculty or administrative staff) and then randomly selected. The final sample consisted of 120 employees, representing approximately 16% of the total population.

### 4.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections:

1. Demographic Information: This section collected data on respondents' age, gender, educational level, position type, years of experience, and university affiliation.
2. Ethical Leadership Scale: This scale measured perceptions of ethical leadership behaviors during crises. The instrument was adapted from the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown et al. (2005) and modified to include crisis-specific items. The scale consisted of 15 items measuring five dimensions: transparency (3 items), integrity (3 items), empathy (3 items), fairness (3 items), and moral guidance (3 items). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
3. Trust in Leadership Scale: This scale measured employee trust in university leadership during crises. The instrument was adapted from the Trust in Leadership Scale developed by Legood (2021) and consisted of 8 items measuring both cognitive and affective trust. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale.
4. Organizational Commitment Scale: This scale measured organizational commitment using the Three-Component Model developed by Malaysia (2011). The scale consisted of 18 items measuring affective commitment (6 items), continuance commitment (6 items), and normative commitment (6 items). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale.

All instruments were translated into Arabic using the back-translation method to ensure linguistic and cultural equivalence. The translated instruments were pilot-tested with 20 employees from two private universities not included in the final sample to assess clarity and reliability.

### 4.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection took place between February and April 2023. Following approval from university administrations and the research ethics committee, questionnaires were distributed to selected participants through their respective university administrations. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and given the option to withdraw at any time. Completed questionnaires were collected in sealed envelopes to ensure anonymity. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 120 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 80%.

### 4.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0. The analysis proceeded in several stages:

1. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic variables and scale items.
2. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales.
3. Inferential statistics including Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between ethical leadership behaviors, trust in leadership, and organizational commitment.
4. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized relationships and identify predictors of trust and organizational commitment.
5. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022) to test whether trust in leadership mediates the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and organizational commitment.
6. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in perceptions based on demographic variables.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The demographic characteristics of the 120 participants are presented in Table 1. The sample included 65 male (54.2%) and 55 female (45.8%) respondents. The majority of participants (62.5%) were between 30-49 years old, with 25% being 29 years or younger and 12.5% being 50 years or older. In terms of educational level, 45% held master's degrees, 30% held bachelor's degrees, 20% held doctoral degrees, and 5% held other qualifications. Regarding position type, 60% were faculty members and 40% were administrative staff. The sample was relatively evenly distributed in terms of years of experience, with 35% having 1-5 years, 40% having 6-10 years, and 25% having more than 10 years of experience.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=120)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	65	54.2%
	Female	55	45.8%
Age	≤29 years	30	25.0%
	30-39 years	45	37.5%
	40-49 years	30	25.0%
	≥50 years	15	12.5%
Educational Level	Bachelor's Degree	36	30.0%



Position Type	Master's Degree	54	45.0%
	Doctoral Degree	24	20.0%
	Other	6	5.0%
Years of Experience	Faculty	72	60.0%
	Administrative Staff	48	40.0%
	1-5 years	42	35.0%
	6-10 years	48	40.0%
	>10 years	30	25.0%

### 5.2. Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As shown in Table 2, all scales demonstrated acceptable reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .92, exceeding the recommended threshold of .70 (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2011).

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis of Measurement Scales**

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Ethical Leadership Scale	15	.92
- Transparency	3	.85
- Integrity	3	.88
- Empathy	3	.82
- Fairness	3	.86
- Moral Guidance	3	.81
Trust in Leadership Scale	8	.89
Organizational Commitment Scale	18	.90
- Affective Commitment	6	.88
- Continuance Commitment	6	.78
- Normative Commitment	6	.83

### 5.3. Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and ranges for the main research variables. The mean score for ethical leadership behaviors was 3.42 (SD = .68), indicating moderate to high levels of perceived ethical leadership during crises. Among the dimensions of ethical leadership, transparency received the highest mean score (M = 3.68, SD = .72), while moral guidance received the lowest mean score (M = 3.15, SD = .75). Trust in leadership had a mean score of 3.38 (SD = .71), and organizational commitment had a mean score of 3.51 (SD = .65). Among the components of organizational commitment, affective commitment had the highest mean score (M = 3.75, SD = .68), while continuance commitment had the lowest mean score (M = 3.20, SD = .72).

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ethical Leadership	3.42	.68	1.80	4.80
- Transparency	3.68	.72	2.00	5.00
- Integrity	3.55	.75	1.67	5.00
- Empathy	3.40	.78	1.33	5.00
- Fairness	3.32	.82	1.33	5.00
- Moral Guidance	3.15	.75	1.33	4.67
Trust in Leadership	3.38	.71	1.75	5.00
Organizational Commitment	3.51	.65	2.00	4.89
- Affective Commitment	3.75	.68	2.00	5.00
- Continuance Commitment	3.20	.72	1.50	4.83
- Normative Commitment	3.58	.70	1.67	5.00

### 5.4. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between ethical leadership behaviors, trust in leadership, and organizational commitment. As shown in Table 4, ethical leadership behaviors were significantly and positively correlated with both trust in leadership ( $r = .78, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $r = .82, p < .01$ ). Trust in leadership was

also significantly and positively correlated with organizational commitment ( $r = .75, p < .01$ ). These results provide initial support for hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Among the dimensions of ethical leadership, transparency showed the strongest correlation with trust in leadership ( $r = .72, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $r = .76, p < .01$ ). Moral guidance showed the weakest correlations with trust in leadership ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ) and organizational commitment ( $r = .62, p < .01$ ), though these correlations were still statistically significant.

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix for Research Variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Ethical Leadership	-										
2. Transparency	.82**	-									
3. Integrity	.85**	.72**	-								
4. Empathy	.83**	.68**	.71**	-							
5. Fairness	.81**	.65**	.70**	.75**	-						
6. Moral Guidance	.78**	.62**	.65**	.68**	.71**	-					
7. Trust in Leadership	.78**	.72**	.70**	.65**	.63**	.58**	-				
8. Organizational Commitment	.82**	.76**	.73**	.70**	.68**	.62**	.75**	-			
9. Affective Commitment	.80**	.75**	.71**	.72**	.67**	.60**	.73**	.88**	-		
10. Continuance Commitment	.65**	.62**	.60**	.58**	.56**	.52**	.60**	.78**	.55**	-	
11. Normative Commitment	.72**	.68**	.65**	.63**	.61**	.57**	.65**	.85**	.65**	.62**	-

Note. \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

### 5.5. Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the predictive relationships between ethical leadership behaviors, trust in leadership, and organizational commitment. As shown in Table 5, ethical leadership behaviors significantly predicted trust in leadership ( $\beta = .78, p < .01$ ), explaining 61% of the variance in trust ( $R^2 = .61, F = 185.32, p < .01$ ). This result supports hypothesis H1.

Ethical leadership behaviors also significantly predicted organizational commitment ( $\beta = .82, p < .01$ ), explaining 67% of the variance in commitment ( $R^2 = .67, F = 240.75, p < .01$ ). This result supports hypothesis H2.

When trust in leadership was added to the model predicting organizational commitment, both ethical leadership behaviors ( $\beta = .45, p < .01$ ) and trust in leadership ( $\beta = .47, p < .01$ ) were significant predictors, explaining 75% of the variance in commitment ( $R^2 = .75, F = 175.86, p < .01$ ). This result supports hypothesis H3 and suggests that both ethical leadership and trust independently contribute to organizational commitment.

**Table 5: Regression Analysis for Research Variables**

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	$\beta$	t	$R^2$	F
Trust in Leadership	Ethical Leadership	.78	13.61**	.61	185.32**
Organizational Commitment	Ethical Leadership	.82	15.52**	.67	240.75**
Organizational Commitment	Ethical Leadership	.45	6.87**	.75	175.86**
	Trust in Leadership	.47	7.18**		

Note. \*\* $p < .01$

### 5.6. Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) to test whether trust in leadership mediates the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and organizational commitment. As shown in Table 6, the indirect effect of ethical leadership on organizational commitment through trust was significant (indirect effect = .37, 95% CI [.26, .48]), supporting hypothesis H4. The direct effect of ethical leadership on organizational commitment remained significant after controlling for trust (direct effect = .45, 95% CI [.32, .58]), indicating partial mediation. The model explained 75% of the variance in organizational commitment.

**Table 6: Mediation Analysis Results**

Effect	Value	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Direct Effect	.45	.07	.32	.58
Indirect Effect	.37	.06	.26	.48
Total Effect	.82	.07	.69	.95

### 5.7. Differences Based on Demographic Variables

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in perceptions of ethical leadership, trust, and organizational commitment based on demographic variables. As shown in Table 7, significant differences were found based on position type, with faculty members reporting higher levels of ethical leadership ( $F = 8.42$ ,  $p < .01$ ), trust in leadership ( $F = 7.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and organizational commitment ( $F = 9.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) compared to administrative staff.

Significant differences were also found based on years of experience, with employees having more than 10 years of experience reporting higher levels of ethical leadership ( $F = 6.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ), trust in leadership ( $F = 5.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and organizational commitment ( $F = 7.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ) compared to those with less experience.

No significant differences were found based on gender, age, or educational level.

**Table 7: Differences in Research Variables Based on Demographic Variables**

Variable	Ethical Leadership	Trust in Leadership	Organizational Commitment
	F	P	F
Gender	.82	.37	.65
Age	1.45	.23	1.32
Educational Level	1.76	.16	1.54
Position Type	8.42	.01	7.65
Years of Experience	6.75	.01	5.92

### 5.8. Predictive Power of Ethical Leadership Dimensions

A final regression analysis was conducted to examine the relative predictive power of the five dimensions of ethical leadership on trust in leadership and organizational commitment. As shown in Table 8, all five dimensions significantly predicted trust in leadership, with transparency being the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by integrity ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), empathy ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), fairness ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and moral guidance ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The model explained 64% of the variance in trust ( $R^2 = .64$ ,  $F = 41.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Similarly, all five dimensions significantly predicted organizational commitment, with transparency being the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by integrity ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), empathy ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), fairness ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and moral guidance ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The model explained 70% of the variance in organizational commitment ( $R^2 = .70$ ,  $F = 52.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 8: Regression Analysis for Ethical Leadership Dimensions**

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	$\beta$	t	$R^2$	F
Trust in Leadership	Transparency	.28	4.32**	.64	41.32**
	Integrity	.22	3.65**		
	Empathy	.18	3.12**		
	Fairness	.15	2.87**		
	Moral Guidance	.12	2.15*		
Organizational Commitment	Transparency	.30	4.85**	.70	52.87**
	Integrity	.24	4.12**		
	Empathy	.20	3.56**		
	Fairness	.16	3.08**		
	Moral Guidance	.14	2.45*		

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors during crises and their impact on employee trust and organizational commitment within private universities in Babylon Governorate. The

results support all four research hypotheses, highlighting the importance of ethical leadership in fostering trust and commitment during periods of societal and economic upheaval.

### 6.1. Ethical Leadership and Employee Trust

The strong positive correlation between ethical leadership behaviors and employee trust ( $r = .78, p < .01$ ) supports hypothesis H1 and aligns with previous research in various organizational contexts (Bedi et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2005). This finding suggests that when university owners demonstrate ethical behaviors during crises, employees are more likely to trust their leadership. Among the dimensions of ethical leadership, transparency emerged as the strongest predictor of trust, emphasizing the importance of open communication and information sharing during uncertain times.

This finding is particularly relevant for private universities in Babylon Governorate, which operate in an environment characterized by economic fluctuations and social changes. In such contexts, employees face heightened uncertainty about job security, institutional stability, and future prospects. Transparent leadership that openly addresses challenges, shares information about decision-making processes, and communicates clearly about the institution's situation can significantly reduce anxiety and build trust (Waham, 2019).

The finding that faculty members reported higher levels of trust in leadership compared to administrative staff may reflect differences in decision-making involvement, professional autonomy, or communication patterns within these institutions. This suggests that university owners should pay particular attention to building trust with administrative staff, who may feel more vulnerable during crises due to perceptions of limited job security or influence (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2011).

### 6.2. Ethical Leadership and Organizational Commitment

The strong positive relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and organizational commitment ( $r = .82, p < .01$ ) supports hypothesis H2 and is consistent with previous research linking ethical leadership to positive organizational outcomes (Hirschi et al 2020). This finding suggests that ethical leadership during crises plays a crucial role in maintaining employee commitment to the institution, which is essential for organizational resilience and continuity.

Among the components of organizational commitment, affective commitment showed the strongest relationship with ethical leadership, indicating that ethical behaviors by university owners foster emotional attachment to the institution. This is particularly important during crises, when employees may be considering alternative employment options or questioning their continued involvement with the institution (Suleiman, 2023).

The finding that transparency was the strongest predictor of organizational commitment among the ethical leadership dimensions highlights the importance of open communication in maintaining employee commitment during crises. When university owners are transparent about challenges, decisions, and future plans, employees are more likely to feel valued and committed to the institution's mission and success.

### 6.3. The Mediating Role of Trust

The mediation analysis supported hypothesis H4, revealing that trust in leadership partially mediates the relationship between ethical leadership behaviors and organizational commitment. This finding suggests that ethical leadership influences organizational commitment both directly and indirectly through the development of trust. This mediation effect is consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that positive leader behaviors generate trust, which in turn leads to reciprocal commitment from employees.

The partial mediation effect indicates that while trust is an important mechanism through which ethical leadership influences commitment, there are also direct pathways. This suggests that ethical leadership behaviors may influence commitment through additional mechanisms such as perceived organizational support, value congruence, or psychological safety, which were not explicitly measured in this study.

### 6.4. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have several practical implications for university owners and administrators in Babylon Governorate and similar contexts:

1. Prioritize transparency during crises: University owners should prioritize transparent communication, sharing information about challenges, decisions, and future plans openly with employees. This includes regular updates, honest assessments of the situation, and clear explanations for difficult decisions.
2. Develop ethical leadership capabilities: University owners should invest in developing their ethical leadership capabilities, particularly in areas such as integrity, empathy, fairness, and moral guidance. This may involve formal training, mentorship, or peer learning opportunities.
3. Build trust with all employee groups: Special attention should be given to building trust with administrative staff, who reported lower levels of trust compared to faculty members. This may involve more inclusive decision-making processes, regular communication channels, and recognition of their contributions.



4. Foster affective commitment: Strategies to strengthen affective commitment should be prioritized, as this component showed the strongest relationship with ethical leadership. This may include reinforcing the institution's mission and values, creating a sense of shared purpose, and recognizing employee contributions during challenging times.
5. Consider experience levels: University owners should recognize that employees with different levels of experience may have different perceptions and needs during crises. Tailored communication and support strategies may be beneficial for employees with less experience who reported lower levels of trust and commitment.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research employing longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence of causality. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to common method bias. Future research could incorporate objective measures or multiple sources of data. Third, the study focused specifically on private universities in Babylon Governorate, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts.

Future research could explore several promising directions. First, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the specific mechanisms through which ethical leadership influences trust and commitment during crises. Second, comparative studies examining differences between public and private universities, or between universities in different regions, could provide valuable contextual insights. Third, research examining the role of organizational culture, institutional policies, or external factors as moderators of the relationships studied would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership in crisis management.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence of the significant positive relationships between ethical leadership behaviors during crises, employee trust, and organizational commitment within private universities in Babylon Governorate. The findings highlight the critical role of ethical leadership in fostering institutional resilience during periods of societal and economic upheaval. Transparency, integrity, empathy, fairness, and moral guidance emerged as key dimensions of ethical leadership that influence both trust and commitment. The results underscore the importance of ethical leadership development for university owners and administrators in contexts marked by instability and change. By demonstrating ethical behaviors during crises, leaders can build trust and strengthen commitment among employees, contributing to organizational resilience and long-term sustainability. As private universities in Babylon Governorate and similar regions continue to navigate complex challenges, ethical leadership represents a crucial foundation for success.

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