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How Leadership Competencies Influence Nonprofit Retention

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GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Abstract

Employee retention remains a persistent challenge within the nonprofit sector, where structural constraints such as compensation limitations and funding instability contribute to workforce instability (Strub, 2020). While prior research has examined organizational and supervisory predictors of retention, limited scholarship has explored the role of internally regulated leadership competencies at the individual employee level. This study examined whether authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence—conceptualized collectively as the ACE framework—predict turnover intention among paid nonprofit employees. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the model proposed that these competencies align with autonomy, competence, and relatedness in ways that may influence employees' intentions to remain with their organizations.

Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 46 nonprofit employees providing direct services in the United States. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine both the individual and combined predictive effects of the ACE dimensions on turnover intention.

Results did not support the hypothesized direct relationships. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence were not statistically significant predictors of turnover intention when examined individually within a multiple regression framework, nor did a standardized ACE composite account for meaningful variance in the outcome. Observed relationships were small in magnitude and nonsignificant. However, each ACE dimension demonstrated strong internal reliability, and moderate-to-strong intercorrelations among the three constructs indicated structural coherence within individuals.

These findings clarify the boundaries of the ACE framework's direct explanatory capacity with respect to retention-related cognitions in nonprofit settings. While ACE did not function as a direct predictor of turnover intention in this sample, the empirical coherence of its components supports continued examination of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as an integrated constellation of internally regulated leadership capacities. By empirically evaluating an integrated model rather than isolated traits, this study contributes to leadership scholarship by refining theoretical assumptions regarding the role of internal leadership capacity in shaping organizational outcomes and by establishing a foundation for further psychometric and longitudinal investigation.

Keywords: Employee Retention, Turnover, Nonprofit Organizations, Leadership Competencies, Authenticity, Self-Efficacy, Emotional Intelligence, Self-Determination Theory

Chapter 1. Introduction: An ACE Up Your Sleeve

1.1. Background on the Problem

Nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in addressing societal challenges, yet they face persistent issues with employee retention. Recent studies have indicated that nearly half of nonprofit employees planned to leave their roles by 2025, citing factors such as burnout, limited career advancement, and inadequate compensation (Strub, 2020). Unlike many of their for-profit counterparts, nonprofit organizations often operate under resource constraints and rely heavily on intrinsic motivators, which makes retaining skilled employees crucial for sustaining their mission and impact (*National Council of Nonprofits*, 2023). As a result, these organizations must rely on intrinsic motivators, workplace culture, and leadership to retain skilled employees.

High turnover rates disrupt service continuity and impose significant financial and operational burdens on nonprofits and impede their ability to fulfill their social missions and maintain organizational stability (Ford-Colin, 2022). The “nonprofit starvation cycle” further exacerbates this issue, where insufficient funding leads to inadequate investment in staff development and organizational infrastructure (Altamimi & Liu, 2022). While previous research has explored extrinsic factors influencing retention, such as financial incentives and flexible work arrangements (Gelencsér et al., 2023), there is a notable gap in understanding how specific leadership competencies at the individual level among employees contribute to employee retention in the nonprofit sector.

1.2. Introduction to the Current Study

This study examined how three leadership competencies – authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence (ACE) – manifest at the individual employee level across all positions within nonprofit organizations. Unlike traditional leadership studies that focus on the supervisor-employee dynamic, this research investigated how these competencies function within each employee, regardless of hierarchical position. Leadership in this context is not about supervisory authority but about personal attributes that influence retention and workplace commitment.

Rather than examining how supervisors impact employees, this study centered on how employees at every level – from executives to individual contributors – demonstrate and benefit from ACE competencies. By shifting the focus from managerial leadership to personal competencies, this research aimed to uncover how authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence contribute to an individual's workplace commitment and decision to remain in their nonprofit roles. Understanding these dynamics may offer new strategies for fostering a stable and engaged nonprofit workforce.

This study expands the understanding of how individual leadership competencies – rather than hierarchical leadership structures or relationships – affect retention at all levels of nonprofit organizations. The findings provide insights into how fostering authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence within employees can enhance their commitment to the organization and improve overall retention strategies.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Turnover Intention

Turnover, whether voluntary or involuntary, is the termination of the employment relationship between an employee and an organization – when the employee actually leaves the organization. Turnover intention, then, occurs while the employment relationship is still intact. Tett and Meyer mention that turnover intention is a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization and constitutes the final cognitive step in the decision-making process which considers quitting and searching for alternative employment (1993, p. 262).

Mano-Negrin and Tzafrir posit that there are two divergent types of turnover models: micro-level models that focus on behavioral processes and outcomes, and macro-sociological analyses that describe labor market conditions and processes with micro-level models emphasizing the cognitive processes leading to turnover intentions, and macro-level models emphasizing structural factors and alternative external occupational opportunities (2004, p. 443). This mental framework is not only supported by their research, but it is an intuitive way of understanding voluntary turnover in that it involves internal factors and external factors, or intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, respectively.

Researchers have long agreed that turnover intentions are the best predictor of actual turnover and can safely be used as a substitute for turnover behavior (Allen et al., 2003; Fang, 2001; Herrbach et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Speaking broadly about turnover across all business sectors, the consequences of turnover intentions extend beyond individual roles, impacting organizational costs and productivity.

High turnover rates pose an especially significant challenge to nonprofit organizations, impeding their ability to fulfill their social missions and maintain organizational stability (Ford-Colin, 2022). Additionally, the "nonprofit starvation cycle," where limited funding leads to inadequate investment in staff development and organizational infrastructure, further exacerbates retention challenges (Altamimi & Liu, 2022). Given these structural constraints, understanding the underlying factors that drive turnover intentions becomes essential. Research suggests that leadership quality and job satisfaction significantly influence whether employees choose to stay or leave, as both shape employees' day-to-day experiences and long-term commitment to an organization (Arshad & Puteh, 2015; Oh & Oh, 2017; B. Wang et al., 2020). By examining leadership and job satisfaction as key determinants of turnover intentions, it is possible to better understand how workplace conditions either support or thwart employee retention, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of intrinsic motivation.

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping employees' turnover intentions, particularly in nonprofit organizations where intrinsic motivation and mission alignment are key drivers of retention. Research has shown that leadership style significantly influences employees' emotional and cognitive evaluations of their work environment, which in turn affect their intention to stay or leave (Oh & Oh, 2017). Authentic leadership, characterized by self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing, has been found to negatively correlate with turnover intentions (Azanza et al., 2015). This commitment acts as a psychological buffer, making employees less likely to consider leaving. Additionally, transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1993), has been associated with

lower turnover intentions and actual turnover rates in public and nonprofit sectors (Sun & Wang, 2017).

Conversely, toxic leadership has been identified as a significant predictor of turnover intentions. Toxic leadership, which includes behaviors such as micromanagement, authoritarian decision-making, and emotional manipulation, leads to job dissatisfaction and increased stress, ultimately pushing employees toward turnover considerations (Orr, 2021). In nonprofit organizations, where employees often work under resource constraints, the impact of toxic leadership can be particularly damaging, as it undermines morale and commitment to the organization's mission. Thus, leadership quality and competence directly influences the stability of the nonprofit workforce and the ability of these organizations to retain their talent.

Job satisfaction is another key determinant of turnover intentions, with numerous studies highlighting its predictive power in explaining employees' likelihood of leaving an organization (Arshad & Puteh, 2015; DePierro et al., 2024; Jogi et al., 2024; B. Wang et al., 2020). Employees who are engaged – meaning they find their work energizing, meaningful, and aligned with their personal values – are less likely to consider leaving, even when extrinsic rewards are suboptimal (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011). While intrinsic factors such as purpose, autonomy, and professional growth are primary drivers of job satisfaction, extrinsic factors like salary, benefits, and job security still play a role in shaping employees' commitment, and thus, turnover intentions (Brown-Nelson, 2024). Although intrinsic motivators remain the strongest predictors of retention in mission-driven organizations, dissatisfaction with extrinsic rewards can exacerbate turnover, particularly when employees feel undervalued or experience financial strain (Stater & Stater, 2019).

Conversely, job dissatisfaction resulting from a lack of autonomy, opportunities for skill development, or insufficient recognition can increase the likelihood of turnover, particularly in mission-driven roles where employees seek personal fulfillment (Haggerty, 2015). Moreover, when employees perceive an imbalance between their contributions and rewards – whether intrinsic or extrinsic – their sense of organizational commitment weakens, job satisfaction decreases, and turnover risk increases. Addressing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors holistically can create a more supportive and engaging environment, reducing turnover and fostering a stable workforce.

Understanding turnover intentions through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides valuable insights into the interplay between leadership, job satisfaction, and employee retention. SDT posits that employees are motivated by the fulfillment of three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). Leadership style and job satisfaction directly impact the degree to which these needs are met in the workplace. Authentic leadership fosters autonomy by empowering employees to take ownership of their work. It also enhances competence by providing developmental opportunities and constructive feedback while reinforcing relatedness through strong interpersonal relationships and team cohesion (Oh & Oh, 2017). These leadership behaviors align with SDT principles by cultivating a work environment that supports employees' intrinsic motivation, thereby reducing turnover intentions.

Contrarily, when leadership fails to support these psychological needs – either through toxic behaviors or neglect – employees experience increased turnover intentions as their motivation shifts from autonomous to controlled or unmotivated states (Orr, 2021). Similarly, when job satisfaction is compromised due to a lack of meaningful work, growth opportunities, or organizational support, employees' sense of competence and autonomy diminishes, leading to

disengagement and eventual turnover (Brown-Nelson, 2024). Extrinsic factors, while secondary to intrinsic motivation, can also contribute to this decline when perceived inequalities in compensation or job security create stress and dissatisfaction. Organizations that prioritize leadership development and job satisfaction strategies in alignment with SDT principles can mitigate turnover by fostering a work environment that supports employees' psychological well-being and intrinsic motivation.

Leadership competence and job satisfaction are critical factors influencing turnover intentions. Authenticity in leadership helps mitigate turnover by strengthening affective commitment and work engagement (Azanza et al., 2015), while toxic leadership exacerbates turnover by fostering dissatisfaction or stress (Orr, 2021). Likewise, job satisfaction plays a pivotal role in shaping employees' intention to stay or leave. While extrinsic factors such as pay and job security cannot be ignored, their impact is often contingent on employees' overall sense of fulfillment and purpose within the organization (Brown-Nelson, 2024). By integrating these constructs within the SDT framework, organizations can develop targeted interventions to enhance employee retention, ultimately reducing turnover and sustaining a committed workforce.

2.2. Turnover Intentions and Self Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a framework for understanding turnover intentions by emphasizing the role of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). When these needs are frustrated, employees experience decreased intrinsic motivation, increased workplace stress, and disengagement, all of which lead to higher turnover intentions (TI) (Olafsen et al., 2017). Conversely, environments that support self-determined motivation reduce employees' desire to leave by fostering a sense of psychological well-being by satisfying basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy, identified as one of the three fundamental psychological needs in SDT, and involves acting with a full sense of volition and choice (Ryan & Deci, 2023). Employees who lack autonomy often feel constrained, leading to decreased motivation and increased likelihood of having turnover intentions. Competence, another of the fundamental psychological needs in SDT, refers to the experience of behavior as effective and masterful (Olafsen et al., 2017). Employees who believe they are developing skills and exceling in their roles tend to demonstrate greater job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions. Relatedness, the final fundamental psychological need in SDT, speaks to one's need to develop satisfying relationships, but with a caveat: high-quality attachments and relationship satisfaction also require satisfaction of the need for autonomy within the relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2023). Employees who feel disconnected from their colleagues or unsupported by management are more likely to develop or intensify turnover intentions.

The extent to which these psychological needs are supported or thwarted in the workplace significantly influences employee turnover intentions. By applying SDT, organizations can better understand how to mitigate turnover by designing work environments that foster intrinsic motivation. While extrinsic rewards remain relevant, they do not fundamentally address the core psychological needs that determine long-term employee commitment. Consequently, organizations that prioritize autonomy-supportive leadership, competence development, and a culture of meaningful relationships are more likely to sustain an engaged workforce and reduce turnover (Deci et al., 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2023).

Understanding turnover through the lens of SDT also provides a link to the ACE framework, as both emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering professional growth and sustained commitment (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The ACE framework

– Authenticity, Competence, and Emotional Intelligence – expands upon the foundational principles of SDT by further operationalizing how organizations can cultivate environments that support these psychological needs in practical, actionable ways (Baard, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2023). By aligning SDT's psychological needs with ACE's structured competencies, organizations can move beyond conceptual discussions and implement targeted interventions that not only reduce turnover but also enhance overall employee performance and well-being (Maryam et al., 2020; Olafsen et al., 2017).

2.3. Authenticity

Authentic Leadership (AL) has been widely studied as a positive organizational factor, influencing engagement, trust, and retention. Rooted in self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective, AL is associated with higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions among employees (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Leaders who model authenticity foster a workplace climate that promotes psychological safety, allowing employees to express themselves without fear of negative consequences (Gardner et al., 2021). While much of the research on authenticity has focused on leadership, authenticity itself is a broader construct that extends beyond leadership roles.

Authenticity is a somewhat nebulas concept to many. It has been the center of research studies for decades in both the individual context (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and the organizational leadership context (Ostermeier et al., 2022). More people are likely to describe themselves as "authentic" rather than "inauthentic." But what does that really mean? In 2003, Luthans & Avolio described authenticity as, "Owning one's personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, 'the real me inside')" (p. 242). Avolio & Gardner later expand the definition to, "Owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants,

preferences, or beliefs, and acting in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways consistent with inner thoughts and feelings" (2005, p. 320). Harvard professor Bill George says "Authentic leaders are true to themselves and what they believe in. They engender trust and develop genuine connection with others" and that the key to becoming an authentic leader is developing self-awareness and understanding one's own values (2016, p. 32).

Unlike AL, which focuses on how leaders influence authenticity in others, individual authenticity is an internal trait that shapes how employees experience their work environment (Gardner et al., 2021). In other words, authenticity is not just about leadership influence or organizational climate or culture – it is a deeply personal quality that affects how individuals interpret and navigate their lives, both personal and professional. Research suggests that people who maintain high levels of authenticity experience greater well-being, job satisfaction, and lower stress – factors that directly relate to turnover intentions (Lopez & Rice, 2006). Employees who feel pressured to suppress their authentic selves may experience emotional exhaustion and psychological strain, which can increase the likelihood of turnover (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

The relationship between authenticity and turnover intentions may be indirect, operating through mediators such as emotional labor, workplace stress, and job satisfaction. Employees who consistently suppress their genuine thoughts and emotions at work experience higher emotional labor, leading to burnout and disengagement (Hewlin, 2003). This suppression has been referred to as "facades of conformity" – where employees feel the need to present an inauthentic self to align with organizational norms, ultimately increasing stress and the desire to leave (Hewlin, 2003). Conversely, those who express their authentic selves more freely in the workplace report higher well-being and stronger organizational commitment, reducing their likelihood of turnover (Wood et al., 2008).

"Know thyself" and "To thine own self be true" - wisdom passed down from classical philosophers and playwrights – is supported by research showing that authenticity has been linked with fewer physical and depressive symptoms, lower stress, and lower anxiety (Lopez & Rice, 2006; Ryan et al., 2005) – conditions which the layperson intuitively understands are components of one's wellbeing. Beyond the workplace, authenticity has been linked to commitment and stability in personal relationships such as romantic partnerships and long-term friendships (Lopez & Rice, 2006). While the present study focuses on workplace retention, this broader research supports the idea that authenticity fosters deeper connections and long-term investment in various life domains. Given the evidence that authenticity influences both professional and personal commitment, it stands to reason that employees who feel aligned with their authentic selves at work are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their organizations.

Hypothesis 1

> *H_1. Authenticity positively predicts Turnover Intention, such that as Authenticity scores increase, Turnover Intention scores decrease* (Lopez & Rice, 2006; Wood et al., 2008).

2.4. Competence

Competence is an essential psychological need that influences motivation, job satisfaction, and long-term organizational commitment. One need not be a scholar in any particular field to intuitively understand that people generally do not want to follow a leader whom they deem to be "incompetent" – a concept supported by research linking leadership effectiveness to employee engagement and retention (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). However, competence is not just relevant for leaders; employees' belief in their own ability to perform

tasks effectively – commonly referred to as self-efficacy – plays a crucial role in workplace motivation and turnover intentions (Bandura, 1982). Just as one's judgements of their leader's (in)competence – and not actual, measurable metrics – affects their satisfaction with that leader, one's perception of their *own* level of competence in their own role will impact their job satisfaction (Schulz et al., 2014). Bandura (1982) defines self-efficacy as "people's beliefs in their capabilities to produce given attainments." In 1986, he elaborates that self-efficacy is "people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances." Over the years, researchers have generally agreed that self-efficacy is an individual's internal evaluation of their own capabilities to achieve some desired result(s) (Bargsted et al., 2019; Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013; Ventura et al., 2015; Waddington, 2023), and employees who feel capable in their roles are more engaged, persist through challenges, and are less likely to seek employment elsewhere (Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013).

In this study, "competence" refers to one's self-efficacy within their role – that is, their belief in their ability to successfully complete job-related tasks (Bandura, 1986). Research suggests that self-efficacy is a key driver of workplace performance and well-being, influencing employees ability to overcome obstacles and adapt to changing job demands (Waddington, 2023). Employees with higher professional self-efficacy report greater job satisfaction, lower stress, and a stronger commitment to their organization (Bargsted et al., 2019). Moreover, self-efficacy can act as a buffer against burnout, as employees who feel competent in their work are more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as stressors (Ventura et al., 2015).

The relationship between competence and turnover intentions is well-documented. Employees who lack confidence in their abilities often experience anxiety in the workplace,

leading to disengagement and an increased likelihood of seeking alternative employment (Venkat et al., 2023). Conversely, when employees feel competent, they are more likely to remain committed to their organization, as they associate their work with personal growth and professional success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research also suggests that competency development – through job training, mentorship, or professional development programs – can reinforce employees' sense of self-efficacy, ultimately reducing turnover intentions (Coetzee & Pauw, 2013).

Given the critical role competence plays in workplace retention, it is important to understand how employees develop and sustain their sense of self-efficacy. Bandura (1982) identified four primary sources of self-efficacy: master experiences (past successes), vicarious experiences (observing others), verbal persuasion (encouragement from others), and emotional and physiological states (perceived stress levels). These sources collectively shape employees' confidence in their abilities, influencing not only their workplace performance but also their long-term commitment to their organization (Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013).

This study explores competence through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which positions it as one of three fundamental psychological needs – alongside autonomy and relatedness – that drive motivation and workplace engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When competence is nurtured within an organization, employees are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, which in turn strengthens their commitment and reduces turnover intentions. As the next section will explore, the ability to balance competence with emotional intelligence further enhances employees' ability to remain engaged, resilient, and dedicated to their organizations.

Hypothesis 2

H_2. Competence positively predicts Turnover Intention, such that as Competence scores increase, Turnover Intention scores decrease (Bandura, 1986; Deci et al., 2017; Ventura et al., 2015).

2.5. Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is widely recognized as a critical factor in workplace success, influencing job satisfaction, stress management, and overall employee well-being. Originally conceptualized by Salovey and Mayer (1995), EI refers to an individual's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in personal and professional contexts. Unlike traditional intelligence (IQ), which focuses on cognitive ability, EI emphasizes the role of emotions in decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and resilience in the face of challenges (Salovey et al., 1995). Employees with high EI tend to experience lower workplace stress, stronger social connections, and greater adaptability, all of which contribute to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions (Davis, 2019).

Research consistently links EI to lower turnover rates, as emotionally intelligent employees are better equipped to handle workplace conflict, adapt to organizational change, and build positive relationships with colleagues (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023). In contrast, employees with low EI may struggle with stress regulation, leading to burnout and increased intention to leave (Salovey et al., 2002). Additionally, EI fosters psychological resilience, allowing employees to navigate setbacks without disengaging from their roles (Kotsou et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence is not merely an inherent trait, but a developable skill

(Cherniss et al., 2006), meaning that organizations that invest in EI training programs can actively reduce employee stress and improve retention.

Hypothesis 3

> *H_3. Emotional Intelligence positively predicts Turnover Intention, such that as Emotional Intelligence scores increase, Turnover Intention scores decrease* (Davis, 2019; Grewal et al., 2006; Salovey et al., 1995).

2.6. DISC as an EI Development Tool

One tool that has proven effective in helping individuals develop greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence is the DISC personality assessment. While DISC primarily categorizes individuals based on behavioral tendencies, it also provides insights into how individuals process emotions and interact with others (Popa & Zoghi, 2022). For example, those with high Dominance (D) traits may struggle with emotional regulation under pressure, while those with high Steadiness (S) traits may prioritize relational harmony but suppress personal emotions to avoid conflict (Christy, 2018). By understanding these tendencies, employees can develop targeted strategies to improve self-regulation, interpersonal communication, and emotional adaptability.

Organizations have increasingly incorporated DISC-based training as a means of fostering emotional intelligence among employees (Masen et al., 2021). Studies have shown that DISC assessments, whin coupled with EI training, enhance self-awareness and improve employees' ability to manage workplace stress and relational dynamics (Li, 2024). This is particularly relevant in industries that require high emotional labor, where understanding one's

emotional triggers and communication style can reduce interpersonal friction and workplace dissatisfaction.

Given the strong correlation between EI and job satisfaction, organizations that prioritize emotional intelligence training may see long-term benefits in employee retention. Employees with high EI are more likely to engage in constructive conflict resolution, build supportive professional relationships, and find intrinsic fulfillment in their work (Davis, 2019). Conversely, employees who lack emotional intelligence may struggle with frustration, interpersonal misunderstandings, and ultimately, higher turnover intentions (Cherniss et al., 2006; Coetzee & Pauw, 2013; Davis, 2019).

In summary, EI plays a pivotal role in shaping employees' workplace experiences, influencing everything from stress management to job satisfaction and retention. When combined with tools like DISC assessments, employees gain deeper insights into their emotional tendencies, allowing them to develop the self-regulation and interpersonal skills necessary for long-term professional success.

2.7. Measuring Emotional Intelligence: The Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS)

To evaluate emotional intelligence within the context of this study, the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS) is employed as a validated measure of individuals' ability to attend to, understand and regulate their emotions (Salovey et al., 1995). While DISC is a behavioral assessment, the TMMS provides a self-report framework specifically designed to assess three key dimensions of emotional intelligence: emotional attention, emotional clarity, and emotional repair (Salovey et al., 2002). Emotional attention refers to how much individuals focus on their emotions, emotional clarity reflects their ability to accurately identify and differentiate feelings, and

emotional repair assesses their perceived ability to regulate emotional state effectively (Grewal et al., 2006).

The TMMS aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by emphasizing how individuals ability to regulate their emotions influences intrinsic motivation, workplace commitment, and resilience in challenging environments (Ryan & Deci, 2023). Prior research indicates that individuals with higher TMMS scores exhibit greater psychological well-being, lower turnover intentions, and improved interpersonal relationships (Salovey et al., 2002). These competencies directly contribute to workplace retention by fostering an environment where employees feel emotionally supported and competent in managing workplace stress.

By integrating TMMS into this study, the research aims to provide empirical evidence on the role of self-regulated emotional intelligence in nonprofit employee retention. The inclusion of TMMS allows for a quantitative examination of how emotional intelligence, as an intrinsic leadership competency, contributes to long-term workplace commitment beyond traditional supervisory leadership models. This focus on individual competencies rather than hierarchical structures offers a novel perspective in nonprofit retention research.

2.8. Summary of Literature Review

The research reviewed in this chapter highlights how Authenticity, Competence, and Emotional Intelligence (ACE) collectively influence employee retention and turnover intentions. While much of the literature on turnover focuses on external factors – such as compensation, leadership (the employee-supervisor relationship), and organizational policies – this study shifts the focus to individual psychological traits, aligning with Self-Determination Theory's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs that drive

motivation and workplace commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci et al., 2017) that contribute to long-term workplace commitment. Employees who develop self-awareness, confidence in their abilities, and emotional adaptability are better equipped to navigate workplace challenges and remain engaged in their roles. By examining these factors through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study aims to provide deeper insight into how intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being shape employee retention.

Hypothesis 4

> *H_4. The composite ACE score is more predictive of Turnover Intention than any individual A, C, or E score* (Bandura, 1982; Davis, 2019; Ryan et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2008).

Chapter 3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through the Primary Investigator's professional network using a convenience sampling approach, with eligibility restricted to individuals employed by nonprofit organizations. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook were used in addition to direct outreach to advertise the study. The data collection process remained open for a period between July and December 2025 to maximize response rates and data quality.

To ensure alignment with the mission-driven nature of the study, participants were required to be currently or previously employed full-time or part-time by a nonprofit organization that provides direct services to individuals or communities. This includes services related to health, education, housing, food security, counseling, or other forms of community-based support. While the study is primarily focused on employees of organizations legally classified as 501(c)(3) charitable organizations, participants from other nonprofit designations — including 501(c)(19) veterans organizations and those unsure of their organization's tax status — were eligible for inclusion if their responses indicated that they worked for a nonprofit and their organization met the criteria for providing direct community or individual services. Organizations whose primary function is political advocacy, professional membership, or fraternal activity were excluded through screening logic embedded in the survey.

3.2. Procedures

The study used a cross-sectional survey design to collect self-reported data on turnover intentions, authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and demographic variables. Invitations to participate in the study included an explanation of its purpose and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were directed to complete a secure, web-based survey via Qualtrics, with automated validation checks to minimize missing responses. Participants completed a structured questionnaire that included validated scales for each construct of interest.

Demographic variables including age, gender, tenure, and organizational role were recorded to examine potential covariates. In addition, three items were added to the demographic section of the survey to capture income-related data: respondents were asked to report (1) their annual income from their current or most recent nonprofit job, (2) their total household income, and (3) the number of individuals supported by that income. While compensation is not a primary variable of interest in this study, these data will support future exploratory analyses examining whether economic context may function as a moderating variable in the relationship between ACE competencies and turnover intention. Data cleaning procedures included checks for response consistency, time spent completing the survey, and removal of incomplete submissions.

Data collection occurred between June and December 2025, during which participants submitted their responses through Qualtrics. Each participant's ACE competency scores were calculated both individually and as a composite measure, and these were compared to their TI scores to identify correlations and relationships. Responses were screened for completeness and

consistency in order to maintain data integrity. Incomplete or inconsistent submissions were removed prior to analysis. Identifiable information was not collected to ensure participant anonymity.

Scores for participants' levels of authenticity (A), competence (C), and emotional intelligence (E) were measured both individually and as a composite (ACE) and compared to their scores for turnover intentions (TI) both individually and as a composite.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Turnover Intentions (TI)

Turnover Intentions (TI) was measured using the Turnover Intention Scale-6 (TIS-6), a validated instrument that assesses the likelihood that employees may consider leaving their organization within a specified timeframe (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). As its name implies, this survey has six items measured on a Likert scale with items such as, "How often have you considered leaving your job?" (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). These measures have shown strong reliability in previous research on turnover intentions within nonprofit sectors.

The TIS-6 scale was selected due to its strong psychometric properties, including demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.80$) (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). This measure has been widely used to assess turnover risk in professional settings, making it an appropriate choice for evaluating nonprofit employees' turnover intentions. To reduce potential ambiguity around the term "job" for participants whose roles are closely tied to specific professions (e.g., social work, education, healthcare), a clarifying instruction was added prior to the TIS-6 item block. The instruction read: *"Please answer the following question(s) with your current or most recent*

job at a nonprofit organization in mind — not your profession or career as a whole. If you are a former employee, think back to your most recent nonprofit employment. During the past 9 months..." This was intended to ensure consistent interpretation of the items, emphasizing that responses should reflect turnover intentions specific to the respondent's current or most recent nonprofit role rather than their broader professional trajectory. No modifications were made to the wording of the original TIS-6 items.

Reliability analysis was performed to confirm internal consistency. This step ensured that the scale consistently measures turnover intention across different participants and workplace contexts. The results provided further insight into the internal reliability of the TIS-6 within the nonprofit sector sample.

3.3.2. The Authenticity Scale

Authenticity was measured using the Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008), which encompasses three dimensions: self-alienation, authentic living, and acceptance of external influence. This scale consists of 12 items, rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Does Not Describe Me At All to 7 = Describes Me Very Well), and includes sample items such as, "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs," and "I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others" (reverse-scored) (Wood et al., 2008). Higher scores on Authentic Living and lower scores on Self-Alienation and Acceptance of External Influence indicate greater authenticity.

Self-Alienation reflects the extent to which individuals feel disconnected from their true selves, while Authentic Living assesses the degree to which individuals behave in accordance with their beliefs and values. Acceptance of External Influence measures the extent to which

individuals conform to external pressures instead of acting in alignment with their internal sense of self.

The Authenticity Scale was chosen due to its strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency values ranging from $\alpha = 0.70$ to 0.86 across different samples (Wood et al., 2008). The scale has been validated across a variety of professional and organizational contexts, supporting its relevance for assessing authenticity in nonprofit employees. Additionally, authenticity was examined as a predictor of turnover intentions, further supporting its relevance in organizational retention research.

3.3.3. The Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (OSE-S)

Competence was evaluated utilizing the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (OSE-S), a validated instrument developed by Schyns and von Collani (2002) and refined by Rigotti et al. (2008). This scale is designed to measure an individual's confidence in their ability to effectively perform work-related tasks and handle workplace challenges. Unlike general self-efficacy measures, which assess broad self-beliefs, the OSE-S is domain-specific making it particularly suitable for assessing professional competence in nonprofit settings.

The original OSE-S short version consists of six items, which participants rate on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all true) to 6 (Completely true). Higher scores indicate greater occupational self-efficacy, reflecting stronger beliefs in one's ability to successfully perform job-related tasks. It includes items such as "I feel prepared for most of the demands in my job" and "Whatever comes my way in my job, I can usually handle it." In this study, however, the ratings will still be on a 6-point Likert-type scale, but the options were changed to

reduce ambiguity: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree.

The OSE-S was selected due to its strong psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (α = .85-.90) across different occupational settings (Rigotti et al., 2008). By assessing employees' perceptions of their competence and confidence in their job performance, this instrument provides insights into how self-efficacy influences job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions. Results from the OSE-S helped determine whether higher occupational self-efficacy correlates with lower turnover intentions and greater workplace commitment. By integrating the OSE-S short version into this study, I provided a concise yet robust measure of competence that aligns with Bandura's (1982, 1986) situational and context-dependent self-efficacy framework and is specifically tailored to occupational contexts in nonprofit organizations.

3.3.4. The Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS)

Emotional Intelligence was assessed using the 30-item version of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS), a self-report measure assessing three core dimensions of EI: Emotional Attention, Emotional Clarity, and Emotional Repair (Salovey et al., 1995). The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater perceived emotional intelligence.

Emotional Attention assesses the extent to which individuals focus on their emotions, while Emotional Clarity evaluates their ability to accurately identify and differentiate between emotional states. Emotional Repair measures an individual's confidence in regulating their

emotional state effectively. The TMMS aligns with research demonstrating that employees with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to experience job satisfaction, lower stress levels, and stronger workplace relationships, all of which contribute to reduced turnover intentions.

The TMMS was selected due to its extensive validation, with the 30-item version maintaining strong internal consistency (Attention: $\alpha = .86$, Clarity: $\alpha = .88$, Repair: $\alpha = .82$) comparable to the original 48-item version (Salovey et al., 1995). The reduction from 48 to 30 items was based on factor analysis, ensuring that only items with high loadings ($\geq .40$) were retained while preserving reliability and validity. Sample items include "I pay close attention to how I feel" and "I have a lot of energy when I feel happy."

Given the established factor structure of the TMMS in prior research (Salovey et al., 1995), confirmatory factor analysis was considered but not conducted due to sample size constraints. Instead, internal consistency reliability analyses were performed to assess scale performance within the present sample. Additionally, the TMMS will be examined in relation to turnover intentions in nonprofit settings to validate its predictive power within this study's specific context.

3.4. Data Analytic Protocol

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant demographics and to examine the distributional properties of the study variables. Internal reliability coefficients were calculated for each scale.

Bivariate correlations were examined to assess relationships among authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention. Multiple regression analyses were

conducted to evaluate the predictive relationships between the ACE dimensions and turnover intention, both as individual predictors and as a standardized composite measure.

These procedures were selected to assess the extent to which internally regulated leadership competencies accounted for variance in turnover intention within the nonprofit sample. Statistical significance was evaluated using an alpha level of .05, and standardized coefficients were examined to interpret relative predictive strength.

Chapter 4. Results

4.1. Sample Characteristics

4.1.1. Total Responses and Inclusion Criteria

A total of 72 survey responses were initially collected between June and December 2025. Respondents were screened based on three criteria: (1) paid employment status (excluding volunteers), (2) employment by an eligible nonprofit organization, and (3) whether their organization provides direct services to individuals or communities. For the purposes of this study, “eligible nonprofit organization” refers to entities classified as 501(c)(3) charitable organizations or 501(c)(19) veterans organizations, as well as others that provide community-based services such as health care, education, housing, food security, or counseling. Organizations whose primary purpose was political advocacy, professional membership, or fraternal activity were excluded through embedded survey logic.

After applying these inclusion criteria, 12 responses were removed due to incomplete survey data (failure to complete one or more of the primary scales). An additional 8 responses were excluded because the respondents either identified as volunteers rather than paid employees or did not provide an answer to the employment status item. Finally, 5 responses were removed due to survey completion times of less than 90 seconds, indicating insufficient response engagement. The final analytic sample therefore consisted of 47 responses, all of whom reported that they met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. Excluded responses were not analyzed. Due to listwise deletion in the regression analyses, one additional case was excluded, resulting in an analytic sample of N = 46.

Table 1

Participant Screening and Final Analytic Sample

Stage	n	Remaining N
Initial Responses	72	72
Incomplete primary scales	12	60
Employment status	8	52
Completion time < 90 sec.	5	47
Listwise deletion	1	46

Note. Final analytic N = 46 for analyses.

4.1.2. Sample Demographics

Participants represented a range of demographic backgrounds. Age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, tenure, income, and household characteristics are summarized in Table 2. The largest age group was 35–44 (34.8%). The majority of respondents identified as female (87.0%). Most participants reported holding a master's degree (58.7%) and substantial nonprofit experience, with 50% indicating fivc or more years in the sector. The mean household size was 2.87 (SD = 1.28).

Table 2

Sample Demographics (N = 47)

Variable	n	%
Age		
18-24	2	4.3
25-34	7	15.2
35-44	16	34.8
45-54	13	28.3
55-64	8	17.4
Gender		
Female	40	87.0
Male	5	10.9
Nonbinary/other	1	2.2
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	26	56.5
Black/African American	9	19.6
Hispanic/Latino/a/x	4	8.7
Asian	3	6.5
Native American/Alaska Native	3	6.5
Other	1	2.2
Education		

Some college	1	2.2
Associate degree	1	2.2
Bachelor's degree	11	23.9
Master's degree	27	58.7
Doctorate/professional	6	13.0
Current NP Tenure (years)		
0-1	3	6.5
2-4	20	43.5
5-9	8	17.4
10-19	10	21.7
20+	5	10.9
NP Income		
< $20,000	4	8.7
$20,000-$34,999	4	8.7
$35,000-$49,999	8	17.4
$50,000-$64,999	10	21.7
$65,000-$79,999	8	17.4
$80,000+	11	23.9
Prefer not to answer	1	2.2
Household Income		
$20,000-$34,999	3	6.5
$35,000-$49,999	2	4.3
$50,000-$64,999	7	15.2

$65,000-$79,999	3	6.5
$80,000+	30	65.2
Prefer not to answer	1	2.2
Household Size		
1	10	21.7
2	6	13
3	14	30.4
4	11	23.9
5+	5	10.9

Note. Analytic N for descriptive reporting is 47 because demographics precede listwise deletion. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Overall, the sample reflected a predominantly female, highly educated group with extensive experience in the nonprofit sector. Household size ranged from one to five or more individuals, with a mean of 2.87 (SD = 1.28). The concentration of respondents with five or more years of sector experience and relatively high levels of educational attainment should be considered when interpreting subsequent analyses, as these characteristics may influence perceptions of leadership competencies and turnover intention.

4.2. Descriptives, Correlations, and Regression Analysis

4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the primary study variables are presented in Table 3. None of the three ACE variables were significantly correlated with turnover

intention. The observed correlations between each ACE variable and turnover intention were small in magnitude ($r = .034$ to $.091$) and nonsignificant (all $p > .05$), indicating no statistically significant linear relationship between these competencies and participants' reported intentions to leave their organization.

In contrast, the ACE variables were significantly and positively correlated with one another. Emotional intelligence was moderately correlated with authenticity ($r = .637$, $p < .001$) and competence ($r = .570$, $p < .001$), and authenticity was also significantly correlated with competence ($r = .514$, $p < .001$). These findings support the conceptual coherence of the ACE framework and indicate shared variance among the three constructs. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability, and Correlations Among Variables (N = 47)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Authenticity	4.42	0.15	(.885)			
2. Competence	5.33	0.55	.514***	(.864)		
3. Emotional Intelligence	3.17	0.17	.637***	.570***	(.879)	
4. Turnover Intention	2.90	0.66	.034	.091	.037	(.805)

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients appear on the diagonal in parentheses.

*** $p < .001$.

Average scores for each ACE variable were above the midpoint of their respective Likert-type response scales, suggesting that participants generally perceived themselves as moderately to highly authentic, competent, and emotionally intelligent in their professional roles. Turnover intention scores were closer to the lower end of the response scale ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.66$), indicating generally low reported intentions to leave during respondents' most recent nonprofit employment experience.

Internal consistency for each of the primary scales was adequate. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .885 for authenticity, .864 for competence, .879 for emotional intelligence, and .805 for turnover intention, indicating acceptable internal consistency within this sample.

4.2.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined predictive influence of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence on turnover intention. Results are presented in Table 4. The regression model did not reach statistical significance, $F(3, 42) = 0.12$, $p = .946$. The predictors collectively accounted for a small proportion of variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = .009$, adjusted $R^2 = -.062$).

Examination of standardized regression coefficients indicated that none of the individual predictors demonstrated a statistically significant unique association with turnover intention. Authenticity ($\beta = -.009$, $p = .965$), competence ($\beta = .106$, $p = .585$), and emotional intelligence ($\beta = -.018$, $p = .935$) were not significant predictors. Collinearity diagnostics indicated no evidence of multicollinearity (all VIF values < 2.0). Accordingly, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were not supported.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Predicting Turnover Intention From ACE Individually (N = 46)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	2.501	3.178		0.79	0.436
Authenticity	-0.040	0.891	-0.009	-0.05	0.965
Competence	0.129	0.234	0.106	0.55	0.585
Emotional Intelligence	-0.029	0.350	-0.018	-0.08	0.935

Note. R = 0.093; R^2 = .009; Adjusted R^2 = −.062; F(3, 42) = 0.12, p = .946; SE of estimate = 0.685.

4.2.3. ACE Composite Score Model

A separate regression analysis examined whether a standardized ACE composite score predicted turnover intention. The model was not statistically significant, F(1, 44) = 0.18, p = .673, R^2 = .004, adjusted R^2 = −.019. The standardized regression coefficient for the ACE composite was β = .064, p = .673. These findings were consistent with the multivariate model and indicate that the ACE composite did not significantly predict turnover intention in this sample. Hypothesis 4 was also not supported.

Table 5

Simple Regression Predicting Turnover Intention From ACE Composite (N = 46)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	2.898	0.099		29.31	< .001
ACE	0.050	0.118	0.064	0.424	0.673

Note. $R = 0.064$; $R^2 = .004$; Adjusted $R^2 = -.019$; $F(1, 44) = 0.18$, $p = .673$

Overall, the results indicated that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence were positively interrelated but were not significantly associated with turnover intention. Neither the individual predictors nor the ACE composite explained a meaningful proportion of variance in turnover intention within this sample. The implications of these findings are considered in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Overview of the Findings

5.1.1. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

The study tested four primary hypotheses: that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence would each negatively predict turnover intention, and that a composite ACE score would demonstrate a stronger predictive effect than any individual component. None of these hypotheses were supported. In the multiple regression model, the three predictors collectively accounted for a minimal proportion of variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = .009$), and none demonstrated statistically significant unique associations with the outcome. In the separate simple regression analysis, the ACE composite similarly explained negligible variance ($R^2 = .004$).

The absence of statistically significant effects was accompanied by small observed effect sizes. Standardized coefficients were close to zero across models, indicating limited directional association between ACE competencies and turnover intention within this sample. These findings provide clear empirical boundaries regarding the direct predictive capacity of ACE for turnover intention under the conditions studied.

Importantly, the analytic distinction between unique and shared variance is central to interpretation. The multiple regression model assessed whether each competency contributed uniquely when controlling for the others, whereas the composite model examined their aggregated influence. The convergence of null findings across both approaches strengthens confidence that the absence of predictive effects reflects the data rather than analytic artifact.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence (ACE) predict turnover intention among paid nonprofit employees. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the model proposed that these competencies align with autonomy, competence, and relatedness in ways that could reduce employees' intentions to leave their organizations.

The results did not support the proposed hypotheses. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence did not demonstrate statistically significant unique associations with turnover intention in the multiple regression model. In a separate analysis, the standardized ACE composite likewise did not account for a meaningful proportion of variance in turnover intention.

At the same time, the ACE components demonstrated strong internal reliability and were moderately to strongly correlated with one another. Authenticity has been linked to psychological integration and reduced self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008), competence reflects perceived capability consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1982), and emotional intelligence involves awareness and regulation of affective processes (Salovey et al., 1995). The intercorrelations observed in this study indicate that these constructs operate in a coordinated manner as related dimensions of individual leadership capacity.

Importantly, this study contributes to the literature by empirically examining ACE as a unified framework within a nonprofit workforce context. While prior research has explored each component independently, fewer studies have investigated their integrated function as a constellation of leadership-related capacities. The findings therefore clarify the predictive scope of the model. Although ACE did not directly predict turnover intention in this sample, the evidence of structural coherence supports continued examination of the framework under alternative conditions and with different outcomes.

5.1.2. Structural Coherence of the ACE Framework

Beyond hypothesis testing, the findings provide important insight into the internal configuration of the ACE framework. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence demonstrated moderate-to-strong positive intercorrelations, indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of one competency tended to report higher levels of the others. These associations were statistically robust and consistent across the correlation matrix. Such patterns suggest that the three constructs operate in a coordinated manner rather than as isolated traits.

The magnitude of the intercorrelations warrants careful consideration. While the constructs were clearly related, they were not redundant. Correlations in the moderate-to-strong range indicate shared variance alongside meaningful distinctiveness. This pattern is theoretically consistent with the proposition that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence represent complementary dimensions of self-regulatory leadership capacity. Each construct reflects a distinct psychological process—self-congruence, perceived capability, and affective regulation—yet these processes are likely to co-occur within individuals who exhibit higher levels of adaptive functioning.

Importantly, structural coherence should not be conflated with unidimensionality. The data do not suggest that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence collapse into a single indistinguishable construct. Rather, the pattern of associations supports the conceptualization of ACE as a constellation of related but distinct capacities. This distinction is central to the framework's theoretical integrity. A unidimensional structure would imply redundancy; a coherent multidimensional structure implies integration without loss of conceptual differentiation.

From a measurement perspective, the strong internal reliability coefficients for each scale further reinforce construct stability within this sample. Reliability does not establish validity, but it provides necessary evidence that the instruments functioned consistently. When considered alongside the observed interrelationships, the reliability findings support continued examination of ACE as an integrated model rather than as a coincidental grouping of loosely associated variables.

Taken together, these results provide preliminary empirical support for the structural integration of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as a unified framework. Although the framework did not demonstrate predictive validity with respect to turnover intention in this study, the internal configuration of the constructs aligns with the theoretical proposition that they form a coordinated system of leadership-related capacities. The distinction between structural coherence and predictive scope is critical: the former appears supported, while the latter remains bounded within the context examined.

5.1.3. Empirical Contribution to Leadership and Nonprofit Scholarship

This study contributes to leadership and nonprofit scholarship by empirically examining authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as an integrated framework rather than as isolated constructs. Although each of these dimensions has been examined extensively within distinct theoretical traditions (Bandura, 1982; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008), prior research has generally approached them as separate constructs rather than as an integrated framework. Authenticity has been studied within authentic leadership and self-congruence literature (Wood et al., 2008), competence within self-efficacy and motivational theory (Bandura, 1982; Rigotti et al., 2008), and emotional intelligence within affective and relational frameworks (Salovey et al., 1995). By testing these constructs together within a unified analytic model, the

present study addresses a fragmentation in the literature and evaluates whether their integration yields additive explanatory value.

In addition, this study extends leadership research into the nonprofit workforce context. Much of the existing literature on turnover intention emphasizes structural and organizational variables, including compensation, workload, supervisory support, and funding stability. Fewer studies examine whether individual-level leadership-related competencies function as direct predictors of retention decisions in nonprofit settings. By explicitly testing ACE against turnover intention, this study clarifies the extent to which personal leadership capacities independently account for variance in retention-related outcomes within a mission-driven sector.

The findings provide boundary-setting evidence regarding the predictive scope of the ACE framework. While the integrated model demonstrated structural coherence, it did not explain meaningful variance in turnover intention in this sample. This distinction is theoretically informative. It suggests that the integration of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence does not automatically translate into direct influence over complex organizational decisions such as employee retention. Rather than invalidating the framework, this evidence delineates the limits of its direct predictive application under the conditions examined.

Importantly, null findings contribute to the literature when they are theoretically grounded and transparently reported. The absence of significant effects reduces the likelihood that the ACE framework exerts strong direct influence on turnover intention in relatively stable nonprofit contexts. By empirically testing and bounding this relationship, the study advances leadership scholarship beyond conceptual proposal and into evidence-based refinement. Such boundary clarification is essential in the early stages of framework development.

Finally, the study contributes methodologically by providing reliability estimates and inter-construct associations for the ACE components within a nonprofit workforce sample. These data offer an empirical starting point for future confirmatory analyses and replication efforts. While additional validation is necessary, the present findings establish a foundation upon which more complex modeling, longitudinal designs, and cross-sector comparisons can build.

Taken together, the study advances leadership scholarship not by confirming a predicted effect, but by empirically interrogating an integrative framework and clarifying its predictive boundaries. In doing so, it contributes to a more precise understanding of how individual leadership-related competencies intersect with organizational outcomes in nonprofit environments.

5.2. Interpreting the Null Findings

5.2.1. Proximal Versus Distal Outcomes

One interpretive consideration involves the alignment between the ACE competencies and the selected outcome variable. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence represent dispositional and self-regulatory capacities that operate at the level of internal psychological functioning. Authenticity has been linked to psychological integration and reduced self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008), competence reflects perceived capability central to self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1982), and emotional intelligence involves awareness and regulation of affective processes (Salovey et al., 1995). These constructs are theoretically associated with motivation, resilience, and adaptive functioning.

Turnover intention, however, represents a behavioral intention shaped by both internal psychological states and external structural conditions. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes

that need satisfaction is influenced not only by personal dispositions but also by environmental supports and constraints (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An employee may possess high levels of authenticity, competence, and emotional regulation yet operate within an organizational environment that constrains autonomy, limits advancement, or imposes workload strain. In such cases, trait-level competencies may not directly determine retention decisions.

The null findings therefore suggest that turnover intention may function as a comparatively distal outcome relative to the competencies examined. Leadership-related traits may exert stronger influence on proximal psychological variables such as engagement, affective commitment, or well-being, which are more directly aligned with self-regulatory processes. Turnover intention, by contrast, often reflects a broader evaluative process incorporating compensation, career mobility, and organizational conditions, factors frequently highlighted in nonprofit retention research. The absence of direct predictive effects may therefore reflect outcome proximity rather than conceptual incoherence within the ACE framework.

This interpretation does not imply that turnover intention was an inappropriate dependent variable. Rather, it clarifies that the pathway from individual leadership-related competencies to retention behavior may be indirect and contingent upon contextual factors. The present findings therefore refine understanding of how ACE competencies relate to organizational outcomes within nonprofit settings.

Recent empirical research also suggests that constructs conceptually adjacent to the ACE framework continue to demonstrate significant relationships with turnover-related outcomes in contemporary organizational contexts. For example, a study of nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic found that emotional intelligence was significantly associated with lower turnover intention and that job performance partially mediated this relationship (R. Wang, 2022).

Similarly, more recent research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence can reduce turnover intention and burnout by improving employees' capacity for emotional regulation and workplace adaptation (Galanis et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the broader body of evidence indicating that emotional competencies contribute to retention-related outcomes, although the mechanisms involved may operate indirectly through mediating factors such as performance, stress, or burnout.

Recent studies examining competence-related constructs have produced comparable results. For example, research examining workplace self-efficacy and turnover intention found that self-efficacy significantly influenced employees' intentions to remain with their organizations, often through mediating variables such as job satisfaction or organizational commitment (Pratama et al., 2025). Additional work has similarly demonstrated that self-efficacy plays a meaningful role in turnover processes when examined alongside contextual workplace variables such as support or work-family conflict (Geremias et al., 2025). These contemporary findings suggest that emotional regulation and competence-related beliefs remain empirically associated with turnover intention and related outcomes across a range of organizational contexts. The absence of statistically significant direct effects in the present study therefore may reflect contextual boundary conditions within nonprofit environments or the limited statistical power associated with a small analytic sample and limited variability in turnover intention responses rather than a fundamental disconnect between the ACE framework and the broader literature. Turnover intention represents a distal outcome that reflects the culmination of multiple cognitive, affective, and contextual influences (Tett & Meyer, 1993). While it is widely used as a proxy for actual turnover behavior, its distal nature may limit the detectability of direct effects from internally regulated competencies. The ACE constructs examined in this study may

therefore exert stronger influence on more proximal outcomes, such as job satisfaction or engagement, which in turn contribute to turnover intention.

5.2.2. The Complexity of Turnover Intention

Turnover intention has been conceptualized as a cognitive and behavioral intention reflecting an employee's conscious deliberation about leaving an organization (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). Broader turnover scholarship similarly characterizes intention to leave as a key proximal antecedent of actual turnover behavior and as a construct shaped by attitudinal, relational, and contextual factors (Tett & Meyer, 1993). As a construct, turnover intention represents more than immediate dissatisfaction; it reflects an evaluative process in which individuals weigh perceived alternatives, organizational conditions, and personal circumstances before forming a stay-or-leave judgment. Unlike proximal psychological variables such as engagement or affective commitment, turnover intention captures a forward-looking appraisal that integrates both internal states and external constraints.

Research within nonprofit contexts consistently highlights compensation structures, reward systems, and organizational resource constraints as contributors to turnover intention (Brown-Nelson, 2024; Stater & Stater, 2019). Broader turnover process models likewise emphasize the role of perceived organizational support and human resource practices in shaping employees' withdrawal cognitions (Allen et al., 2003). These structural and relational conditions may exert substantial influence on employees' intentions independent of their personal leadership-related capacities.

From a motivational perspective, Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that behavior emerges from the interaction between individual psychological needs and environmental

supports (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applications of Self-Determination Theory within nonprofit and mission-driven contexts suggest that need satisfaction is influenced not only by personal capacities but by the degree to which organizational structures support autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Baard, 1994). Even when individuals possess strong internal competencies aligned with these needs, organizational conditions may constrain the expression or fulfillment of those needs over time. This distinction further highlights the difference between within-person and within-environment factors in shaping turnover intention. The ACE competencies represent internal, within-person characteristics that influence how individuals interpret and respond to their work experiences, whereas turnover intention is shaped by a broader set of environmental conditions. As a result, within-person factors alone may be insufficient to predict outcomes that are strongly influenced by external constraints. Turnover intention may therefore reflect not only dispositional characteristics but also the extent to which organizational systems facilitate or frustrate psychological need satisfaction. This may be particularly relevant in nonprofit contexts, where employees are often drawn to mission-driven work and may already exhibit high levels of intrinsic motivation (*National Council of Nonprofits*, 2023). This potential restriction in variability may limit the observable relationship between internally regulated competencies and turnover intention.

The absence of significant predictive effects therefore suggests that leadership-related self-regulatory capacities may not directly translate into turnover intentions within structurally constrained nonprofit settings. Rather than indicating conceptual weakness, this finding clarifies that turnover intention represents a multilayered outcome shaped by psychological, organizational, and economic influences. The results refine the explanatory scope of the ACE

framework by distinguishing between internal leadership capacity and complex retention-related decision processes.

5.2.3. Structural Boundary Conditions in Nonprofit Contexts

The nonprofit sector presents distinct structural conditions that may shape the relationship between individual leadership-related competencies and turnover intention. Compensation constraints, funding instability, and resource limitations are well-documented characteristics of nonprofit organizations (*2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey Results | National Council of Nonprofits*, 2023; Strub, 2020). Empirical research further indicates that nonprofit employees may experience turnover dynamics that differ from those observed in for-profit contexts, with compensation structures and organizational support playing significant roles in intention formation (Stater & Stater, 2019). Broader turnover process models likewise emphasize the influence of perceived organizational support and human resource practices in shaping employees' stay-or-leave decisions (Allen et al., 2003). These structural realities may therefore influence employees' decisions to remain with or leave an organization in ways that extend beyond personal leadership capacity.

Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness depends not only on individual disposition but also on environmental support (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applications of Self-Determination Theory within mission-driven settings suggest that need satisfaction is contingent upon organizational structures that enable meaningful autonomy and perceived competence (Baard, 1994). Although authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence align conceptually with these psychological needs, the degree to which those needs are satisfied is shaped by organizational context. An employee may possess strong self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and personal alignment with values, yet still

encounter limited advancement opportunities, constrained autonomy, or financial strain. Under such conditions, personal leadership-related capacities may support day-to-day functioning without directly determining turnover intention. This dynamic may be further shaped by household-level economic factors that may also influence turnover intention in ways not captured by the present model. In the present sample, 65.2% of participants reported household incomes of $80,000 or more, and the majority reported household sizes greater than one, suggesting that many participants may have had access to additional sources of income beyond their individual nonprofit salary. Individuals with such financial support may experience less immediate pressure to leave nonprofit roles despite lower compensation levels, whereas those without this buffering may be more sensitive to external constraints, regardless of their internal competencies.

The findings of the present study suggest that the influence of the ACE competencies may be bounded by these structural realities. Turnover intention has been conceptualized as a deliberative outcome shaped by both attitudinal states and contextual evaluations (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Within nonprofit environments characterized by limited resources and constrained flexibility, retention decisions may therefore reflect systemic conditions more strongly than individual dispositional strengths. This does not undermine the theoretical grounding of the ACE framework. Rather, it clarifies that its predictive influence on retention-related outcomes may depend on the broader organizational system in which employees operate.

By situating the results within the structural context of nonprofit organizations, this study reinforces the importance of examining leadership development alongside organizational design. Individual capacity and systemic conditions function together. The absence of significant

predictive effects in this sample therefore refines understanding of where and how the ACE framework may exert observable influence.

5.3. Implications of the Results

5.3.1. Implications for Leadership Theory and Conceptualization

The findings support the viability of examining leadership capacity at the individual employee level as a distinct domain of inquiry. Much of the leadership literature reviewed in earlier chapters emphasizes relational dynamics, supervisory behaviors, and leader–follower exchanges as primary mechanisms of influence. By contrast, the present findings suggest that leadership-related capacities may also be conceptualized as internally regulated competencies operating within individuals, independent of formal authority. Although authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence did not significantly predict turnover intention, their strong internal reliability and moderate-to-strong interrelationships indicate that they function cohesively within individuals. This structural coherence provides empirical support for conceptualizing leadership capacity as an internally regulated constellation of traits rather than solely as a relational or supervisory construct. The ACE competencies examined in this study are best understood as relatively stable, trait-like characteristics, as reflected in the established measures used to assess authenticity, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence (Rigotti et al., 2008; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008). While their expression may vary across situations, they represent enduring tendencies rather than momentary states. Framed in this way, the ACE framework reflects a form of internal self-regulation, in which individuals regulate their behavior in accordance with their internal values and motivations (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000), even if such internal capacities do not directly translate into observable organizational outcomes such as turnover intention.

Authenticity has been associated with psychological integration and reduced self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008), competence with perceived capability and adaptive functioning consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1982; Rigotti et al., 2008), and emotional intelligence with affective awareness and regulation (Salovey et al., 1995). Self-Determination Theory further emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness function as foundational psychological needs shaping motivation and well-being (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applications of this framework in mission-driven contexts suggest that internally regulated capacities may support sustained engagement when environmental supports are present (Baard, 1994). When considered together, the observed alignment among these constructs reinforces the proposition that leadership may operate through self-regulatory processes that shape how individuals interpret experiences, sustain motivation, and engage in organizational life. In this sense, leadership capacity can be examined independently of formal authority or positional influence.

The absence of a direct relationship with turnover intention does not negate this conceptual contribution. Rather, it clarifies that internally regulated leadership capacities may not function as direct levers for altering structural employment decisions. The findings therefore distinguish between leadership as self-regulatory capacity and leadership as a predictor of specific organizational outcomes. This distinction refines theoretical conversations about what leadership models are intended to explain and expands the scope of leadership scholarship beyond role-based influence.

5.3.2. Implications for Nonprofit Organizations

For nonprofit organizations, the findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between leadership development and retention strategy. Compensation limitations, funding

instability, and resource constraints remain influential factors in employee retention (*2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey Results | National Council of Nonprofits*, 2023; Strub, 2020). Empirical research further indicates that nonprofit employees' turnover intentions are shaped by compensation structures and perceived organizational support in ways that may differ from for-profit settings (Stater & Stater, 2019). The absence of a significant relationship between the ACE competencies and turnover intention suggests that cultivating authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence alone may not directly alter employees' decisions to remain with or leave an organization. The present findings also suggest that leadership development efforts focused solely on enhancing individual competencies may be insufficient to meaningfully reduce turnover intentions. While authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may improve employees' day-to-day experience, they do not directly alter structural conditions such as compensation, workload, or resource availability. As a result, efforts to improve retention may require greater emphasis on shaping the organizational environment, including policies, support systems, and working conditions, rather than relying exclusively on the development of individual leadership-related capacities.

However, this does not diminish the practical value of these competencies. Authenticity has been linked to psychological integration and reduced self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008), competence to perceived capability and persistence (Bandura, 1982; Rigotti et al., 2008), and emotional intelligence to affect regulation and relational effectiveness (Salovey et al., 1995). Within nonprofit environments that frequently involve mission-driven work, emotional labor, and resource scarcity, these internal capacities may support resilience, professional confidence, and relational stability even when structural pressures remain unchanged. Such capacities are

theoretically linked to engagement and adaptive performance, which have been shown to relate to turnover intention through indirect pathways (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011).

The findings therefore suggest that leadership development initiatives in nonprofit settings should be viewed as complementary rather than corrective. Developing internal leadership-related capacities may strengthen day-to-day functioning, enhance collaboration, and support adaptive performance. At the same time, retention challenges rooted in structural realities require organizational solutions. The present study reinforces that leadership capacity and organizational design function together, and that improvements in one domain do not automatically compensate for deficiencies in the other.

By empirically testing individual-level leadership competencies within a nonprofit workforce, this study clarifies that leadership development should not be evaluated solely through turnover metrics. Turnover intention reflects a multifaceted decision process shaped by attitudinal and structural variables (Tett & Meyer, 1993). The present findings therefore suggest that nonprofit organizations may assess the value of cultivating authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence through broader indicators of organizational functioning, including engagement, collaboration, and adaptive capacity, rather than assuming a direct effect on retention outcomes.

5.3.3. Implications for Leadership Development

Beyond the nonprofit context, the results suggest broader implications for how leadership development is framed and evaluated. The ACE competencies demonstrated structural coherence within individuals, indicating that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence function as an integrated set of internal capacities. This pattern supports the view that leadership may be

cultivated at the level of personal regulation and internal alignment rather than exclusively through role-based training. Self-Determination Theory applied to work settings emphasizes that internally regulated motivation emerges when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported within the individual and the environment (Olafsen et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000), suggesting that leadership development may operate through strengthening these internal capacities.

Leadership development efforts are frequently assessed in terms of observable organizational outcomes such as performance, retention, or engagement. The present findings indicate that internally regulated competencies may not always produce direct, measurable effects on complex structural outcomes. Turnover intention, as conceptualized in prior research, represents a deliberative outcome shaped by attitudinal precursors and contextual evaluations (Tett & Meyer, 1993). As such, leadership-related competencies may influence intermediate psychological states—such as engagement or perceived organizational support—without directly altering stay-or-leave intentions (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011; Allen et al., 2003). However, the absence of a direct predictive relationship with turnover intention does not negate the developmental relevance of these capacities. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence remain theoretically grounded in established psychological literature and aligned with autonomy, perceived capability, and relational functioning (Bandura, 1982; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008).

The broader implication is that leadership capacity may be foundational rather than outcome-specific. Internally regulated competencies shape how individuals interpret experiences, respond to adversity, and engage with others, consistent with theoretical accounts of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982), emotional regulation (Salovey et al., 1995), and authenticity as psychological

integration (Wood et al., 2008). These processes may influence organizational functioning indirectly or cumulatively rather than through immediate shifts in discrete metrics. Research linking engagement, perceived organizational support, and self-efficacy to longer-term retention and performance outcomes suggests that internally regulated competencies may operate through layered motivational pathways rather than through isolated direct effects (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011; Allen et al., 2003). Evaluating leadership development solely through short-term outcome variables may therefore overlook the deeper role of internal capacity in sustaining adaptive performance and relational stability.

These findings encourage a more nuanced understanding of leadership development—one that distinguishes between cultivating internal leadership capacity and achieving specific structural outcomes. The ACE framework, grounded in established theories of self-efficacy, emotional regulation, authenticity, and intrinsic motivation (Bandura, 1982; Deci et al., 2017; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008), remains viable as a developmental lens even as its direct predictive relationship with turnover intention was not supported in this study. This distinction clarifies that leadership capacity may function as a foundational psychological resource whose organizational impact is mediated by broader systemic and motivational processes.

5.4. Limitations

5.4.1. Cross-Sectional Design

This study was certainly not without its limitations. The cross-sectional design of the study limits causal interpretation. Data from each participant were collected at a single point in time, preventing conclusions regarding temporal ordering between ACE competencies and turnover intention. Although the theoretical framework suggested that authenticity, competence,

and emotional intelligence would influence turnover intention, it is also possible that individuals with lower turnover intention perceive themselves more positively on leadership-related traits. Without longitudinal data, directional inferences cannot be established.

Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the dynamic interaction between individual capacities and environmental conditions over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A cross-sectional design captures only a static representation of that interaction. Turnover intention may fluctuate in response to organizational events, workload changes, and evolving contextual evaluations that shape employees' stay-or-leave deliberations (Tett & Meyer, 1993). The present findings therefore reflect associations observed within a single temporal snapshot rather than developmental trajectories.

This limitation does not invalidate the findings, but it constrains interpretation. The absence of significant predictive relationships should be understood within the confines of a cross-sectional analytic approach rather than as definitive evidence regarding the long-term dynamics between leadership-related competencies and retention-related cognitions.

5.4.2. Self-Report Measurement and Common Method Variance

All primary variables in this study were assessed using self-report instruments. Although validated scales were employed for authenticity (Wood et al., 2008), competence (Rigotti et al., 2008), emotional intelligence (Salovey et al., 1995), and turnover intention (Bothma & Roodt, 2013), reliance on a single method of data collection introduces the possibility of common method variance, a concern in behavioral research when predictor and criterion variables are obtained from the same source and within the same measurement context (Podsakoff et al., 2003). When both predictor and outcome variables are collected from the same respondent at the

same time, shared method factors may obscure or inflate observed relationships or, in some cases, attenuate them through systematic response patterns or measurement error (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In addition, self-report measures of leadership-related traits may be influenced by social desirability or self-perception bias, as constructs such as self-efficacy and authenticity rely on individuals' subjective appraisal of their own functioning (Bandura, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2008). Such evaluations may be influenced by social desirability or systematic self-perception bias, particularly when constructs reflect socially valued traits or internal regulatory capacities (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a result, reported scores may reflect idealized self-perceptions rather than fully objective representations of behavior. While internal reliability coefficients were strong within this sample, reliability does not eliminate the possibility of systematic response bias.

The use of self-report measures is consistent with prior research examining self-efficacy, authenticity, and emotional intelligence as perceived internal capacities (Bandura, 1982; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008). The absence of significant predictive relationships between ACE dimensions and turnover intention should not be interpreted solely as evidence of substantive independence between constructs. Shared method variance may have influenced the magnitude of observed effects in either direction. However, future investigations incorporating multi-source data, temporal separation of measurement, or mixed-method designs in future research would allow for more rigorous evaluation of the ACE framework while reducing potential method-related constraints (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). The present findings should therefore be interpreted within the context of a single-method design.

5.4.3. Sample Size and Statistical Power

The analytic sample consisted of 46 participants, which limits statistical power to detect small effects. In multiple regression, adequate sample size is necessary not only for stable parameter estimation but also for sufficient power to detect statistically significant relationships. Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) recommend minimum case-to-predictor guidelines for regression analyses, including $N \geq 50 + 8m$ for testing the overall model and $N \geq 104 + m$ for testing individual predictors, where m represents the number of predictors. With three predictors included in the present model, these guidelines would suggest substantially larger samples than were available in this study.

Although these recommendations are heuristic rather than absolute thresholds, they illustrate that the present study was powered primarily to detect relatively large effects. Small-to-moderate relationships between ACE dimensions and turnover intention may therefore have gone undetected. Consequently, the absence of statistically significant findings should be interpreted cautiously, as limited statistical power increases the risk of Type II error.

This limitation does not invalidate the analytic procedures employed; however, it constrains the strength of inferences that can be drawn regarding the magnitude and detectability of effects within this sample. Future investigations utilizing larger samples would provide greater precision in estimating regression coefficients and improve confidence in evaluating the explanatory capacity of the ACE framework.

The sample was also predominantly female, which is generally consistent with workforce trends in the nonprofit sector but may limit generalizability, as potential differences in workplace experiences and turnover-related factors across gender were not examined. Future research

utilizing more demographically balanced samples may provide additional insight into the relationships examined in this study.

Age may also influence the interpretation of these findings. Individuals earlier in their careers may place greater emphasis on career mobility, compensation growth, advancement opportunities, or other factors which could alter the relative influence of internal competencies and external conditions in shaping turnover intention.

Turnover intention itself may also vary across demographic categories such as age, financial stability, and career stage, which were not explicitly examined in this study. As a result, some variability in turnover intention may reflect differences in individual circumstances rather than the influence of ACE competencies alone.

5.5. Future Research

The present findings clarify the boundaries of the ACE framework while also identifying several productive directions for continued empirical inquiry. Although authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence did not directly predict turnover intention within this nonprofit sample, the structural coherence of the framework and its theoretical grounding in established psychological literature warrant further investigation. Future research should extend the model across alternative outcomes, analytic designs, and measurement approaches.

5.5.1. Alternative Outcome Variables

The results suggest that turnover intention may not be the most proximal outcome for examining internally regulated leadership capacities. Turnover intention was defined in this study as the conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization (Bothma & Roodt, 2013). As

operationalized through the TIS-6, it reflects a cognitive withdrawal intention rather than a direct indicator of engagement or psychological functioning.

Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence are theoretically aligned with psychological integration (Wood et al., 2008), self-efficacy and perceived capability (Bandura, 1982; Rigotti et al., 2008), and affective awareness and regulation (Salovey et al., 1995). Prior turnover research conceptualizes intention to leave as part of a process model in which attitudinal and motivational states precede withdrawal cognitions (Tett & Meyer, 1993). These constructs may operate more proximally on outcomes such as engagement, resilience, job satisfaction, or organizational commitment before influencing retention-related decisions. Future research should examine whether ACE competencies demonstrate stronger associations with these motivational or affective outcomes within established turnover process frameworks.

5.5.2. Mediating and Moderating Pathways

The absence of direct predictive effects does not preclude indirect or conditional relationships. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness operate within environmental contexts that either support or frustrate psychological needs (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is therefore plausible that ACE competencies function as mediating or moderating variables within more complex models rather than as isolated direct predictors. Testing such relationships would require explicit modeling of mediating and moderating pathways consistent with established conceptual distinctions in social psychological research (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

For example, authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may influence job satisfaction, engagement, or perceived organizational support, which have been linked to

turnover intention in prior research (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011; Allen et al., 2003). In such models, ACE competencies would operate indirectly through psychological states that subsequently shape retention-related cognitions. Alternatively, consistent with self-efficacy theory, perceived competence and emotional regulation capacities may buffer the impact of stressors on behavioral intentions (Bandura, 1982). ACE competencies may therefore moderate the relationship between workload strain, resource constraints, or organizational injustice and employees' intentions to leave. Testing mediation and moderation models would allow researchers to examine whether ACE operates through motivational pathways or as a protective factor within adverse contexts. Such models would provide a more nuanced understanding of how internally regulated leadership capacities interact with organizational systems.

5.5.3. Longitudinal and Developmental Designs

The cross-sectional design employed in this study limits examination of temporal dynamics. Turnover intention has been conceptualized as part of a process unfolding over time rather than as a static state (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Leadership-related competencies may likewise evolve in response to organizational events, supervisory changes, and career transitions. Longitudinal research designs would allow scholars to assess whether changes in authenticity, competence, or emotional intelligence correspond with shifts in engagement, commitment, or retention-related intentions, thereby clarifying temporal ordering and developmental trajectories.

In addition, developmental investigations could explore how ACE competencies emerge across career stages. Self-efficacy theory emphasizes the role of mastery experiences and feedback in shaping perceived competence over time (Bandura, 1982), and authenticity has been linked to processes of psychological integration that unfold developmentally (Wood et al., 2008). Self-Determination Theory further suggests that sustained autonomy and competence support

within work environments contributes to growth and internalization (Deci et al., 2017). Examining ACE within onboarding processes, leadership development interventions, or coaching contexts would provide insight into whether these competencies are malleable and whether growth trajectories relate to meaningful organizational outcomes.

5.5.4. Cross-Sector and Multilevel Examination

This study focused exclusively on paid nonprofit employees providing direct services. The nonprofit sector is characterized by structural constraints, including compensation limitations and funding volatility, that may influence retention dynamics independently of individual leadership-related capacities (Stater & Stater, 2019). Turnover intention has been conceptualized as context-sensitive and shaped by organizational conditions as well as attitudinal states (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Future research should therefore examine the ACE framework across corporate, public-sector, educational, and international contexts to determine whether predictive patterns differ across environments and structural conditions.

Multilevel designs may also prove informative. Leadership capacity may function not only as an individual attribute but as a collective or team-level phenomenon. Social cognitive theory emphasizes that efficacy beliefs can operate collectively within groups, shaping shared perceptions of capability and coordinated action (Bandura, 1982). Investigating whether aggregate ACE profiles within teams relate to climate, cohesion, or collective efficacy would extend the framework beyond individual-level analysis. Such approaches would allow researchers to examine how internally regulated leadership capacities operate within broader organizational systems and contextual supports (Deci et al., 2017).

5.5.5. Psychometric Validation of the ACE Framework

Finally, the present findings also underscore the need for continued psychometric examination of ACE as a potentially integrated construct. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence demonstrated strong internal reliability and moderate-to-strong intercorrelations within this sample, suggesting structural alignment among the components. Each dimension is grounded in established measurement traditions (Rigotti et al., 2008; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008); however, the present study examined them as coordinated predictors rather than as indicators of a higher-order latent structure. While confirmatory factor analysis or higher-order modeling was beyond the scope of the current design, the observed coherence provides preliminary justification for examining whether ACE functions as a unified latent construct.

Future research should therefore evaluate the factor structure of ACE using confirmatory factor analysis procedures consistent with established guidelines for multivariate modeling (Tabachnick & Fidell, Linda S., 2007). In addition, studies should assess discriminant validity relative to theoretically adjacent constructs and test measurement invariance across demographic groups and organizational contexts. Such analyses would clarify whether ACE represents a higher-order leadership capacity or a constellation of related but distinct dimensions. Establishing construct validity through rigorous measurement testing would strengthen the theoretical foundation of the framework and determine whether it warrants consideration as an integrated model of internally regulated leadership capacity.

5.6. Conclusion

This study was designed to address a specific gap in leadership and nonprofit scholarship. While authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence have each been examined extensively within their respective theoretical traditions, limited research has explored their integrated function as a unified constellation of internally regulated leadership capacities within nonprofit settings. The ACE framework was proposed as a theoretically grounded synthesis of these constructs, drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1982), authenticity research (Wood et al., 2008), and emotional intelligence scholarship (Salovey et al., 1995).

The hypothesized direct relationship between ACE competencies and turnover intention was not supported. Neither the individual dimensions nor the standardized composite accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in turnover intention among paid nonprofit employees. These findings delineate the limits of the framework's direct predictive capacity with respect to retention-related cognitions in this context.

At the same time, the study provides empirical support for the structural alignment of the ACE components. Each dimension demonstrated strong internal reliability, and the moderate-to-strong intercorrelations among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence indicate coherent functioning within individuals. This pattern reinforces the conceptual premise that internally regulated leadership capacities may operate as an integrated constellation rather than as isolated traits.

The findings therefore contribute to leadership scholarship in several important respects. First, they establish empirical boundary conditions by demonstrating that internally regulated

leadership competencies may not directly predict turnover intention within structurally constrained nonprofit environments. Second, they provide preliminary support for examining ACE as an integrated framework worthy of continued theoretical refinement and psychometric validation. In doing so, the study extends leadership inquiry beyond fragmented construct-level investigations and advances discussion of leadership capacity as an internal, developmentally grounded phenomenon.

This research does not confirm nor dismiss the ACE framework; rather, it situates it within clearer empirical boundaries. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence form a theoretically aligned and empirically coherent constellation of leadership capacities. Their influence on organizational outcomes may be indirect, conditional, or contextually bounded rather than directly predictive of turnover intentions. By examining this integrated model within a nonprofit workforce, the study contributes to a more precise understanding of how internally regulated leadership capacity interacts with organizational systems. The continued refinement and testing of the ACE framework across outcomes, contexts, and methodological approaches will determine its broader relevance within evolving leadership scholarship.

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Appendix A. Qualtrics Survey

Nonprofit ACE Study Survey

Research Agreement **Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?** I am Josh Talbert, a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Oklahoma Graduate College, and I invite you to participate in my research entitled "An ACE Up Your Sleeve: How Leadership Competencies Influence Nonprofit Retention". This research is being conducted at The University of Oklahoma Graduate College. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a current or former employee of a nonprofit organization, either part-time or full-time. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research. Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research. **What is the purpose of this research?** This research aims to better understand the driving forces behind retention and turnover intentions within the nonprofit sector. **How many participants will be in this research?** Up to approximately 1,000 people will take part in this research. **What will I be asked to do?** If you agree to be in this research, you will complete a 10- to 15-minute online survey. **What are the risks and benefits if I participate?** There are no benefits from being in this research. Risks are minimal and described below. **Data collected online:** The organization hosting the data collection platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research. **Will I be compensated for participating?** You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research. **Who will see my information?** There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records. **Do I have to participate?** No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time. **Will my identity be anonymous or confidential?** Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses. **What will happen to my data in the future?** We might share your de-identified data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you. **Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints?** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at 940-268-8888, by email at jtal38@ou.edu, or contact my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Jody Worley, at 918-660-3000 or by email at jworley@ou.edu. You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s). By providing

information to the researcher(s), I am agreeing to participate in this research. IRB #__18508__ IRB Approval Date___5/7/2025___

- ○ I am at least 18 years old; AND I AGREE to participate in this research. (1)
- ○ I am NOT at least 18 years old; OR I DECLINE to participate in this research. (End survey) (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma? I am Josh Talbert, a Ph... = I am NOT at least 18 years old; OR I DECLINE to participate in this research. (End survey)

Page Break

Screen1 Which of the following best describes the nonprofit designation of your most recent nonprofit employer?

- ○ 501(c)(3) - Charitable Organization (1)
- ○ 501(c)(19) - Veterans Organization (2)
- ○ Another nonprofit designation (e.g., 501(c)(4), 501(c)(6), etc.) (3)
- ○ I don't know / Not sure of the designation, but I have worked for a nonprofit organization (4)
- ○ I do not work / have not worked for a nonprofit organization (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If Screening Question 1 = I do not work / have not worked for a nonprofit organization

Screen2 Did your most recent nonprofit organization primarily provide direct services to individuals or communities (e.g., health, education, housing, food security, counseling, or other forms of support)?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Not sure (3)

Skip To: End of Survey If Screening Question 2 = No

Screen3 Are you currently or were you previously employed (not volunteering) at this organization?

- ○ Yes, full-time (1)
- ○ Yes, part-time (2)
- ○ Yes, previously full-time (3)
- ○ Yes, previously part-time (4)
- ○ No, currently or previously a volunteer (6)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you currently or were you previously employed (not volunteering) at this organization? = No, currently or previously a volunteer

Page Break

Age What is your age?

- ○ 18-24 (1)
- ○ 25-34 (2)
- ○ 35-44 (3)
- ○ 45-54 (4)
- ○ 55-64 (5)
- ○ 65+ (6)
- ○ Prefer not to answer (7)

Gender What is your gender?

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Non-binary / other (3)
- ○ Prefer not to say (4)

Ethnicity What is your ethnicity?

- ○ Black or African American (1)
- ○ Hispanic or Latino (2)
- ○ Asian (3)
- ○ Native American or Alaska Native (4)
- ○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (5)
- ○ White or Caucasian (6)
- ○ Other (7)
- ○ Prefer not to answer (8)

Education What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ○ Less than high school (1)
- ○ High school graduate or GED (2)
- ○ Some college (no degree) (3)
- ○ Associate degree (4)
- ○ Bachelor's degree (5)
- ○ Master's degree (6)
- ○ Doctorate or professional degree (Ph.D, M.D., J.D., etc.) (7)
- ○ Prefer not to answer (8)

Exp_Org What is your work experience in NONPROFIT organizations?

- ○ 0-1 year (1)
- ○ 2-4 years (2)
- ○ 5-9 years (3)
- ○ 10-19 years (4)
- ○ 20+ years (5)

Exp_Total What is your TOTAL work experience?

- ○ 0-1 year (1)
- ○ 2-4 years (2)
- ○ 5-9 years (3)
- ○ 10-19 years (4)
- ○ 20+ years (5)

Pay_Org What was your annual income from your most recent nonprofit job (before taxes and deductions)?

- ○ Less than $20,000 (1)
- ○ $20,000 - $34,999 (2)
- ○ $35,000 - $49,999 (3)
- ○ $50,000 - $64,999 (4)
- ○ $65,000 - $79,999 (5)
- ○ $80,000 or more (6)
- ○ Prefer not to say (7)

Income What was your total annual household income (before taxes and deductions) at the time of your most recent nonprofit employment? Include your income plus any income from other individuals in your household or other streams of income (e.g., spouse, partner, roommates, relatives, rental income, etc.).

- ○ Less than $20,000 (1)
- ○ $20,000 - $34,999 (2)
- ○ $35,000 - $49,999 (3)
- ○ $50,000 - $64,999 (4)
- ○ $65,000 - $79,999 (5)
- ○ $80,000 or more (6)
- ○ Prefer not to say (7)

House At the time of your most recent nonprofit employment, how many people (including yourself) were supported by your household income?

- ○ 1 (1)
- ○ 2 (2)
- ○ 3 (3)
- ○ 4 (4)
- ○ 5 or more (5)

Page Break

Auth When answering these items, please only consider your nonprofit employment experiences. There are no right or wrong answers for these items, so please respond in a way that best reflects your true thoughts and feelings.

	Does Not Describe Me At All (1) (1)	(2) (2)	(3) (3)	(4) (4)	(5) (5)	(6) (6)	Describes Me Very Well (7) (7)
I think it is better to be yourself, than to be popular. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I don't know how I really feel inside. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I usually do what other people tell me to do. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I always feel I need to do what others expect me to do. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other people influence me greatly. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel as if I don't know myself very well. (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I always stand by what I believe in. (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am true to myself in most situations. (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I feel out of touch with the 'real me.' (10)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I live in accordance with my values and beliefs. (11)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel alienated from myself. (12)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Comp When answering these items, please only consider your nonprofit employment experiences. There are no right or wrong answers for these items, so please respond in a way that best reflects your true thoughts and feelings.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Somewhat Agree (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (6)
I can remain calm when facing difficulties in my job because I can rely on my abilities. (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I am confronted with a problem in my job, I can usually find several solutions. (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Whatever comes my way in my job, I can usually handle it. (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○
My past experiences in my job have prepared me well for my occupational future. (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I meet the goals that I set for myself in my job. (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel prepared for most of the demands in my job. (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

EI When answering these items, please only consider your nonprofit employment experiences. There are no right or wrong answers for these items, so please respond in a way that best reflects your true thoughts and feelings.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I don't pay much attention to my feelings. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I never give in to my emotions. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I don't usually care much about what I'm feeling. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
One should never be guided by emotions. (4)	○	○	○	○	○
It is usually a waste of time to think about your emotions. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
People would be better off if they felt less and thought more. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Feelings are a weakness humans have. (7)	○	○	○	○	○
I don't think it's worth paying attention to your emotions or moods. (8)	○	○	○	○	○
Feelings give direction to life. (9)	○	○	○	○	○
The best way for me to handle my feelings is to experience them to the fullest. (10)	○	○	○	○	○
I believe in acting from the heart. (11)	○	○	○	○	○

I often think about my feelings. (12)	○	○	○	○	○
I pay a lot of attention to how I feel. (13)	○	○	○	○	○
I am usually very clear about my feelings. (14)	○	○	○	○	○
I am rarely confused about how I feel. (15)	○	○	○	○	○
I almost always know exactly how I am feeling. (16)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel at ease about my emotions. (17)	○	○	○	○	○
I usually know my feelings about a matter. (18)	○	○	○	○	○
I am often aware of my feelings on a matter. (19)	○	○	○	○	○
My belief and opinions always seem to change depending on how I feel. (20)	○	○	○	○	○
I can never tell how I feel. (21)	○	○	○	○	○
Sometimes I can't tell what my feelings are. (22)	○	○	○	○	○
I am usually confused about how I feel. (23)	○	○	○	○	○
I can't make sense out of my feelings. (24)	○	○	○	○	○

Although I am sometimes sad, I have a mostly optimistic outlook. (25)	○	○	○	○	○
No matter how badly I feel, I try to think about pleasant things. (26)	○	○	○	○	○
When I become upset I remind myself of all the pleasures in life. (27)	○	○	○	○	○
I try to think good thoughts no matter how badly I feel. (28)	○	○	○	○	○
When I am upset I realize that the "good things in life" are illusions. (29)	○	○	○	○	○
Although I am sometimes happy, I have a mostly pessimistic outlook. (30)	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

TI1 Please answer the following question(s) with your current or most recent job at a nonprofit organization in mind — not your profession or career as a whole. If you are a former employee, think back to your most recent nonprofit employment. During the past 9 months...

	Never (1)	- (2)	- (3)	- (4)	Always (5)
How often did you (or do you) consider leaving your job at that nonprofit organization? (1)	○	○	○	○	○
How often are you (or were you) frustrated when not given the opportunity at work to achieve your personal work-related goals? (2)	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you (or did you) dream about getting another job that would better suit your personal needs? (3)	○	○	○	○	○

TI2 Please answer the following question(s) with your current or most recent job at a nonprofit organization in mind — not your profession or career as a whole. If you are a former employee, think back to your most recent nonprofit employment. During the past 9 months...

	Very Satisfying (1)	- (2)	- (3)	- (4)	Totally Dissatisfying (5)
How satisfying is (or was) your job in fulfilling your personal needs? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

TI3 Please answer the following question(s) with your current or most recent job at a nonprofit organization in mind — not your profession or career as a whole. If you are a former employee, think back to your most recent nonprofit employment. During the past 9 months...

	Highly Unlikely (1)	- (2)	- (3)	- (4)	Highly Likely (5)
How likely are you (or were you) to accept another job at the same compensation level should it be (or have been) offered to you? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

TI4 Please answer the following question(s) with your current or most recent job at a nonprofit organization in mind — not your profession or career as a whole. If you are a former employee, think back to your most recent nonprofit employment. During the past 9 months...

	Always (1)	- (2)	- (3)	- (4)	Never (5)
How often do you (or did you) look forward to another day at work? (1)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix B. IRB Authorization



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: May 07, 2025 **IRB#:** 18508

Principal Investigator: Josh B Talbert

Approval Date: 05/06/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: An ACE Up Your Sleeve: How Leadership Competencies Influence Nonprofit Retention

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor. Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,



Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.

Chair, Institutional Review Board

Kendra Williams-Diehm, Ph.D. Vice
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Eric Pennello, Ph.D.

Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix C. Authorization for Use of TIS Scale

Talbert, Joshua B.

From: roodtg8@gmail.com
Sent: Wednesday, October 30, 2024 7:02 AM
To: Talbert, Joshua B.
Subject: RE: Request Permission to Use TIS-15/TIS-6
Attachments: Turnover intentions questionnaire - v4.doc

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Flagged

Dear Josh

You are welcome to use the TIS for your research (please accept this e-mail as the formal permission letter). For this purpose please find the TIS-15 attached for your convenience. The TIS-6 (version 4) consists of the first six items high-lighted in yellow. You may use any one of these two versions. The TIS is based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

The only two conditions for using the TIS are that it may not be used for commercial purposes (but only for post graduate research) and second that it should be properly referenced as (Roodt, 2004) as in the article by

Bothma & Roodt (2013) in the SA Journal of Human Resource Management (open access).

It is easy to score the TIS-6. Merely add the item scores to get a total score. The midpoint of the scale is 18 (3 x 6). If the total score is below 18, then it indicates a desire to stay. If the scores are above 18, it indicates a desire to leave the organisation. The minimum a person can get is 6 (6 x 1) and the maximum is 30 (6 X 5). No item scores need to be reflected (reverse scored) for the TIS-6. Please note that there are items that need to be reverse scored for the TIS-15 (indicated by an R after the item number).

It is recommended that you conduct a CFA on the item scores to assess the dimensionality of the scale. We found that respondents with a matric (grade12) tertiary school qualification tend to understand the items better and consequently an uni-dimensional factor structure is obtained.

If you wish to translate the TIS in a local language, you are welcome to do so. It is recommended that a language expert is used in the translate - back translate method. I wish you all the best with your research!

Best regards

Gert

Prof Dr Gert Roodt

From: Talbert, Joshua B. <jtal38@ou.edu>

Sent: Wednesday, 30 October 2024 02:51

To: roodtg8@gmail.com

Subject: Request Permission to Use TIS-15/TIS-6

Hello Dr. Roodt,

My name is Josh Talbert. I am a Ph.D student at the University of Oklahoma researching turnover in the nonprofit sector. I was given this email to reach you to request access to your TIS-15 and TIS-6 surveys, as well as your permission to use them for this research. I would greatly appreciate your approval and assistance in obtaining these surveys for this research. I'd be happy to provide yet another validated use-case for your surveys. Thank you for the work that you've done!

My dissertation chair is Dr. Jody Worley (jworley@ou.edu). Please feel free to reach out to Dr. Worley to verify any information.

Kind regards,

Josh Talbert
Organizational and Community Leadership (OCL), Ph.D Program
OCL Program Graduate Research Assistant
OU-Tulsa Student Government Association OCL Program Voting Representative

Appendix D. Reflections on the Research Journey

Origins of the Research Question

This study did not begin with a formal theory. It began with a question that emerged from years of observing leadership in practice: if positive organizational outcomes are frequently attributed to effective leadership, how might those outcomes be cultivated as internal capacities rather than solely as responses to external leadership influence?

My professional experiences across multiple organizational environments repeatedly highlighted the powerful influence that strong leaders can have on employee motivation, engagement, and performance. At the same time, those experiences also revealed the limitations of influence that depends primarily on the presence of a particular leader. When leadership effects rely heavily on positional authority, they may not persist when leadership changes or when employees operate with limited direct supervision. This observation led me to consider whether some of the outcomes typically associated with strong leadership might also be supported through internal competencies within employees themselves.

Questioning the Traditional Leadership Development Model

Another observation that shaped this research involved the way leadership development is commonly structured within organizations. In many contexts, leadership training and development opportunities are directed primarily toward individuals who occupy formal leadership positions. The implicit assumption behind this model appears to be that strengthening leadership at the top of an organization will produce benefits that cascade downward throughout the workforce.

While this approach has clear practical logic, I increasingly questioned whether it fully addresses the needs of employees who do not hold supervisory roles. In practice, frontline employees often carry substantial responsibility for delivering services and maintaining organizational stability, particularly in resource-constrained sectors such as nonprofit organizations. Yet these employees frequently receive comparatively little attention in leadership development efforts. This observation prompted me to consider an alternative perspective: what might happen if organizations invested in the development of internal leadership capacities across all levels of the workforce rather than concentrating those efforts primarily on individuals in formal authority positions?

From Observation to the ACE Framework

As I began shaping this research project, I was mindful of a common pattern in leadership research. Many studies apply an established leadership theory within a new organizational setting and ultimately conclude that the theory operates similarly in that context. While these studies are valuable, I was interested in exploring a question that moved beyond confirming the applicability of existing models. My goal was not simply to demonstrate that a well-established leadership construct produced similar outcomes in another environment, but rather to examine whether a different way of conceptualizing leadership capacity might offer additional insight.

This perspective led me to look more closely at personal characteristics that appeared repeatedly in both leadership scholarship and professional experience. Across various leadership frameworks, certain internal qualities seemed to emerge consistently. Through this process of reviewing the literature and reflecting on organizational practice, three constructs appeared particularly salient: authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence.

SDT offered a clear theoretical explanation for why the ACE traits seemed to matter. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness—SDT's core psychological needs—mapped intuitively onto the ACE traits. Authenticity fosters autonomy and meaningful connection. Competence aligns with self-efficacy and capability. Emotional intelligence supports both connection and resilience.

Together, these characteristics suggested a conceptual framework focused on internal leadership capacity rather than hierarchical leadership roles. This synthesis ultimately became the ACE framework explored in this dissertation.

The Role of Self-Determination Theory

At the outset, there was no formal theory anchoring this research. The ACE framework was not derived from a theoretical model. Rather, it was grounded in observation and inquiry. It emerged from a combination of literature review and professional reflection. As the study progressed, however, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provided a useful theoretical lens through which to interpret these constructs.

SDT proposes that human motivation is influenced by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While the ACE framework was not originally constructed with SDT in mind, the conceptual parallels became increasingly apparent during the development of the study. Authenticity reflects an individual's alignment with personal values and internal motivations, which resonates with the concept of autonomy. Competence directly parallels SDT's emphasis on mastery and capability. Emotional

intelligence, while not identical to relatedness, supports the interpersonal awareness and emotional regulation that facilitate meaningful relationships in the workplace.

SDT therefore provided a theoretical structure that helped explain why the ACE constructs might plausibly relate to employee retention and motivation. In this sense, the theory served as a framework for interpreting the ACE model rather than as the original source from which the framework was derived. The theory helped explain the mechanism behind what the ACE model proposed. It gave structure to the relationships I was exploring, but it did not dictate the study's direction. In that way, SDT was not a starting point. It was a discovery that brought coherence to something already taking shape.

Manuscript Structure and Intellectual Development

For clarity and coherence within the dissertation, Self-Determination Theory is presented before the ACE framework in the literature review. This structure allows readers to first understand the established theoretical foundation before encountering the introduction of the ACE constructs. However, this presentation does not fully reflect the chronological development of the research idea.

In practice, the ACE framework preceded the formal integration of SDT into the study. The theoretical alignment between the two emerged during the research process rather than at its outset. Including this reflection provides transparency regarding that intellectual progression and clarifies how the conceptual model developed over time.

Looking Forward

Although the findings of this study did not support the hypothesized direct relationships between the ACE constructs and turnover intention, the process of developing and examining the framework remains meaningful. The ACE model represents one attempt to shift part of the leadership conversation away from positional authority and toward internal capacities that employees themselves can develop.

Future research may further explore how these competencies interact with other organizational variables, such as job satisfaction, burnout, organizational support, or leadership climate. It may also be valuable to examine the ACE constructs in larger samples or in different organizational sectors to determine whether their influence operates through indirect pathways or contextual conditions not captured in the present study.

For me personally, this research journey reinforced the importance of asking questions that challenge conventional assumptions. Even when results do not fully align with initial hypotheses, the process of exploring those questions can still contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership and motivation. This was not a study born of a hypothesis waiting to be tested. It was a study born of a question that demanded to be explored. And if it contributes even in a small way to reframing what leadership development can be, then it has accomplished what I hoped it would.