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The ACE Model: Testing Authenticity, Competence, and Emotional Intelligence as an Integrated Leadership Construct

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Abstract

The ACE model proposes authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as an integrated set of internally regulated leadership-related capacities. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, the model proposes that these competencies align with autonomy, competence, and relatedness and may function together as an integrated leadership framework operating within individuals. The present study provides an initial empirical evaluation of the ACE model by examining its relationship with turnover intention among nonprofit employees, where employee retention remains a persistent organizational challenge. Using a cross-sectional survey design, findings are reported from an analytic sample of 46 nonprofit employees. 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, which served as an initial criterion variable for evaluating the model. Results did not support the hypothesized predictive 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 provided preliminary evidence of meaningful associations among the ACE dimensions. These findings provide an initial empirical evaluation of the ACE model. While ACE did not function as a direct predictor of turnover intention in this sample, the observed relationships among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence support continued examination of these competencies as a potentially integrated constellation of internally regulated leadership capacities. By empirically evaluating authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as an integrated framework rather than isolated constructs, this study provides an initial foundation for continued theoretical, psychometric, longitudinal, and cross-sector investigation.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Nonprofit Retention and the Need for New Perspectives

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 frequently rely on intrinsic motivators, workplace culture, and leadership-related factors to maintain a stable workforce.

High turnover rates disrupt service continuity, 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, organizational and supervisory influences on retention (Allen et al., 2003; Oh & Oh, 2017), less attention has been devoted to leadership-related competencies operating within employees themselves. Although some studies have alluded to leadership capacities of employees who may not hold formalized leadership positions in nonprofit organizations (Dunaetz et al., 2025; Goldsby et al., 2021), few studies address this directly. This gap is particularly notable in nonprofit settings, where resource constraints often limit organizations’ ability to rely on extrinsic retention strategies (Frey et al., 2026; Gelencsér et al., 2023; Thomas, 2024). Accordingly, greater attention is needed to leadership as an individual capacity rather than solely a positional role.

Leadership scholarship reflects a similar pattern. Much of the leadership literature has focused on how individuals in formal leadership positions influence followers, teams, and organizations. Transformational leadership, for example, emphasizes leader behaviors that inspire and motivate followers (Bass & Avolio, 1993), while authentic leadership focuses on the influence of self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective on follower outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Likewise, servant leadership emphasizes leaders’ commitment to serving and developing others (van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Across these perspectives, the primary unit of analysis has typically been the leader–follower relationship and its associated organizational outcomes. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining whether the competencies commonly associated with effective leadership may also function as individual capacities among employees regardless of position, title, or formal authority.

This distinction raises an important question. If leadership influences organizational outcomes because of specific qualities possessed by effective leaders, are those qualities exclusive to individuals in formal leadership positions, or are they capacities that can exist throughout an organization? More specifically, could leadership-related competencies operating within employees at all organizational levels contribute to workplace experiences and organizational outcomes independent of supervisory authority? The present study approaches leadership from this latter perspective by examining leadership-related capacities as internally regulated competencies that may be developed and expressed by employees throughout an organization.

1.2. The ACE Model

The ACE model emerged from an effort to better understand the characteristics associated with effective leadership and whether those same characteristics might be meaningfully examined within individuals independent of formal leadership roles. Much of the leadership literature considers effectiveness through the behaviors, qualities, and influence of leaders in relation to followers. Transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, for

example, differ considerably in their assumptions and focal outcomes but each identifies characteristics or behaviors associated with effective leadership and its influence on others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; van Dierendonck et al., 2014). The development of ACE turned this perspective inward. Rather than asking how characteristics associated with effective leaders influence followers, the framework asks whether leadership-related competencies identified through this literature can also be examined as capacities experienced or perceived within individuals themselves, including those who hold no formal leadership position or supervisory authority.

The development of the framework was conceptual rather than the product of a systematic literature review or formal comparison of all possible leadership-related constructs. Through examination of the leadership literature, authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence emerged as three particularly salient and conceptually distinct competencies associated with effective leadership. Authenticity emerged through authentic leadership scholarship emphasizing self-awareness, relational transparency, and congruence between leaders' values and actions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Turning this perspective inward shifted the focus from how authenticity is expressed and perceived in leadership relationships toward individuals' experiences of authenticity within themselves, including authentic living, susceptibility to external influence, and self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008). Competence emerged in part from transformational leadership's emphasis on individualized consideration, through which leaders attend to followers' individual needs and support their development toward their full potential (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1993). Turning this developmental emphasis inward shifted the focus from a leader's development of competence in others toward individuals' perceptions of competence within themselves. Occupational self-efficacy provided an individual-level means of examining this capacity by assessing the competence individuals perceive in their ability to successfully perform the tasks associated with their work (Rigotti et al., 2008; Ma, 2025). Emotional intelligence emerged through scholarship connecting emotional awareness, regulation, interpersonal functioning, and leadership effectiveness (Cherniss et al., 2006; Kurgat & Kamaara, 2022; Saha et al., 2023). Turning this perspective inward shifted the focus toward individuals' own attention to, clarity regarding, and regulation of their emotional experiences (Salovey et al., 1995). Their selection was not intended to suggest that these dimensions constitute the totality of an individual's capacity to lead or that other leadership-related competencies lack theoretical importance. Rather, ACE represents an initial synthesis of three competencies identified through this process and examines them from an individual-level perspective.

Across these diverse perspectives, three recurring competencies consistently appeared: authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence. Authenticity refers to the unobstructed operation of an individual's true or core self in daily life and reflects the degree to which thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are congruent with one's values, beliefs, and self-concept (Wood et al., 2008). Consistent with this perspective, authenticity encompasses authentic living, self-alienation, and the extent to which individuals accept external influence in shaping their behavior (Wood et al., 2008). Competence, operationalized in the present study as occupational self-efficacy, reflects an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully perform job-related tasks (Bandura, 1982). Within the ACE model, emotional intelligence is conceptualized as an individual's ability to attend to, understand, and regulate emotional experiences (Salovey et al., 1995). The construct includes emotional attention, emotional clarity, and emotional repair, reflecting how individuals perceive, interpret, and manage emotions in themselves and their interactions with others.

The ACE model proposes that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may represent an integrated constellation of internally regulated leadership capacities. Un-

like traditional leadership frameworks that focus primarily on influence processes between leaders and followers, the ACE model emphasizes capacities residing within individuals regardless of formal authority. In this view, leadership is not limited to supervisory roles but reflects a set of personal competencies that shape how individuals interpret experiences, respond to challenges, interact with others, and engage with their work.

This perspective expands leadership inquiry beyond questions of how leaders influence employees and instead considers how employees lead themselves. Employees at all organizational levels must navigate workplace demands, regulate emotions, exercise judgment, build relationships, and maintain alignment between personal values and organizational expectations—not only “leaders.” Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may therefore function as important capacities that shape workplace experiences irrespective of organizational position or supervisory authority.

The ACE model is not proposed as a replacement for existing leadership theories or broader perspectives on self-leadership (Kim et al., 2024; Reichard et al., 2025; Tenschert et al., 2025) and employee self-regulation. Rather, its proposed contribution lies in examining authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence collectively as complementary, leadership-related capacities at the individual level. In doing so, ACE provides a framework for examining whether these theoretically distinct competencies can be meaningfully considered together without suggesting that they constitute the totality of an individual’s capacity to lead. The present study provides an initial empirical evaluation of this proposed model within the context of nonprofit employee retention.

1.3. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the ACE Model

As the ACE model developed, an important question emerged: why might authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence function together as an integrated set of leadership-related capacities? Although the model did not originate from a specific theoretical framework, the literature surrounding employee motivation, workplace engagement, and retention repeatedly pointed toward Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a potentially valuable explanatory lens (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory proposes that human motivation and psychological well-being are influenced by the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to experiencing one’s actions as self-directed and congruent with personal values. Competence reflects perceptions of effectiveness and capability in interacting with one’s environment. Relatedness concerns the development of meaningful interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging. According to SDT, individuals are more likely to experience engagement, intrinsic motivation, and well-being when these needs are satisfied (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Although ACE and SDT were developed independently, notable conceptual parallels exist between the two models. Authenticity’s emphasis on congruence between one’s values, beliefs, and behavior parallels SDT’s concept of autonomy, which likewise centers on acting in accordance with one’s authentic sense of self rather than external pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wood et al., 2008). Competence, represented in the present study by occupational self-efficacy, aligns closely with SDT’s competence need because both emphasize an individual’s perceived capability and effectiveness in responding to environmental demands (Bandura, 1982; Rigotti et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Emotional intelligence’s focus on emotional awareness, understanding, and regulation may similarly support SDT’s concept of relatedness by facilitating communication, empathy, interpersonal effectiveness, and the development of meaningful workplace relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salovey et al., 1995).

The relationship between ACE and SDT should be viewed as theoretical rather than structural. The present study does not propose that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence are direct operationalizations of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Rather, SDT provides a useful framework for understanding why these competencies may function together as internally regulated leadership capacities. By emphasizing self-regulation, personal agency, perceived capability, and interpersonal connection, SDT offers a plausible explanation for the mechanisms through which ACE may influence employee experiences and workplace outcomes. Viewed in this manner, SDT does not serve as the foundation of the ACE model but rather as a complementary framework that helps explain why authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may function collectively as leadership-related capacities within individuals.

1.4. ACE and Turnover Intention

The present study sought to address retention-related challenges within nonprofit organizations by examining leadership-related capacities operating at the individual employee level. Turnover intention was selected as the initial criterion variable because it represents one of the most widely studied antecedents of employee turnover and has consistently been identified as the strongest predictor of actual turnover behavior (Allen et al., 2003; Fang, 2001; Herrbach et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2000; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Tett and Meyer (1993) defined turnover intention as a conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave an organization and described it as the final cognitive step preceding actual turnover. Because turnover intention occurs while the employment relationship remains intact, it provides an opportunity to examine factors associated with retention-related decision making before employees actually leave their organizations.

Although the ACE model was not developed specifically as a turnover framework, prior research suggests that each of its components may be relevant to retention-related attitudes and workplace experiences. Authenticity has been associated with psychological well-being, reduced burnout, and healthier interpersonal functioning (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Occupational self-efficacy has been linked to resilience, workplace engagement, job satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions (Rigotti et al., 2008; Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013; Ventura et al., 2015). Emotional intelligence has similarly been associated with reduced stress, stronger interpersonal relationships, adaptability, and lower turnover-related attitudes (Cherniss et al., 2006; Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Davis, 2019; Salovey et al., 1995). Collectively, these findings suggest that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may each contribute to employee experiences that are relevant to retention.

However, existing research has largely examined these competencies independently. The ACE model proposes that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may function not only as individual leadership-related capacities but also as an integrated constellation of internally regulated competencies. Examining turnover intention provided an opportunity to conduct an initial empirical evaluation of this proposition within a nonprofit context. Given the importance of retention to nonprofit effectiveness and the established relationship between turnover intention and actual turnover behavior, turnover intention served as an appropriate initial outcome through which to evaluate the ACE model.

1.5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study sought to address retention-related challenges within nonprofit organizations by examining authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as leadership-related capacities operating at the individual employee level. Drawing upon prior literature linking these competencies to employee well-being, engagement, and retention-related

outcomes (Bandura, 1982; Cherniss et al., 2006; Davis, 2019; Rigotti et al., 2008; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008), the study examined whether each ACE dimension was associated with turnover intention among nonprofit employees. Consistent with prior research, it was hypothesized that higher levels of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence would be associated with lower turnover intention. Additionally, because the ACE model proposes that these competencies may function collectively as an integrated framework, it was hypothesized that a composite ACE score would significantly predict turnover intention.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 46 current and former nonprofit employees. The sample included 32 current full-time employees, 3 current part-time employees, 8 former full-time employees, and 3 former part-time employees. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age and to have current or previous employment experience within a nonprofit organization. Individuals serving exclusively as unpaid volunteers were excluded from participation. To accommodate former nonprofit employees, participants who were no longer employed within the sector were instructed to respond to survey items based on their most recent nonprofit employment experience.

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling methods using professional networks, nonprofit organizations, and social media platforms. Data collection occurred between June and December 2025. The final sample included participants representing a variety of nonprofit organizations, occupational roles, and demographic backgrounds. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Section 3.

2.2. Procedure

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect self-reported data on authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, turnover intention, and demographic characteristics. Data were collected using a secure, web-based survey administered through Qualtrics between June and December 2025. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were provided with an informed consent statement prior to beginning the survey. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained through the University Institutional Review Board (Reference No. 18508, 7 May 2025).

The survey consisted of demographic items followed by validated measures of authenticity, occupational self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention. Demographic information included age, gender, tenure, organizational role, education level, and income-related variables. Participants were asked to report their annual income from their current or most recent nonprofit position, total household income, and the number of individuals supported by that income.

A total of 72 responses were collected during the data collection period. Responses were screened prior to analysis to ensure eligibility and data quality. Thirteen responses were removed because incomplete responses on one or more of the primary study scales prevented calculation of the corresponding study variables. Individual responses were treated as an “incomplete response” when a participant left one or more items unanswered on any of the study measures. An additional eight responses were excluded because respondents identified as unpaid volunteers or did not provide a response to the employment status item. Five responses were removed because survey completion times were less than 90 s, indicating insufficient engagement with survey content. Following these screening procedures, 46 responses remained.

Participant responses were anonymized and prepared for statistical analysis. Scores for authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention were calculated in accordance with the scoring procedures established for each instrument. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence scores were also combined to create a composite ACE score for use in subsequent analyses.

2.3. Measures

Authenticity was measured using the 12-item Authenticity Scale (Wood et al., 2008), which assesses three dimensions of authenticity: authentic living, self-alienation, and acceptance of external influence. Participants responded using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Does Not Describe Me At All) to 7 (Describes Me Very Well). Higher scores indicate greater authenticity. Internal consistency reliability in the present sample was $\alpha = 0.885$. There are no reverse-coded items. An authenticity scale score was calculated for each participant by averaging individual responses on the authenticity items. Divide the sum of the score for the 12 items for each participant by the number of items, 12 in this case. This preserves the original metric meaning. The reported mean authenticity score for the sample was calculated as the average of the scale scores obtained from the individual participants. This scoring procedure follows the protocol used in Wood et al. (2008), using the scale mean calculation rather than summing the item scores. Reporting the sample average of scale scores reflects central tendency across respondents, while averaging individual items retains interpretive scale meaning.

Competence, operationalized in the present study as occupational self-efficacy, was measured using the six-item short form of the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (OSE-S; Rigotti et al., 2008). The instrument assesses an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully perform job-related tasks and manage workplace demands. Response options were adapted from the original six-point scale to a six-point agreement format ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree) to reduce ambiguity while preserving the original response structure. Higher scores indicate greater occupational self-efficacy. Internal consistency reliability in the present sample was $\alpha = 0.864$.

The emotional intelligence dimension of the ACE model was operationalized using the 30-item Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey et al., 1995). The TMMS assesses an individual's self-perceived tendency to attend to, understand, and regulate emotional experiences through three dimensions of emotional intelligence: emotional attention, emotional clarity, and emotional repair. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived emotional intelligence. Internal consistency reliability in the present sample was $\alpha = 0.879$.

To create the ACE composite, mean scores were first calculated for the authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence measures. Because the three instruments used different Likert response scales, each mean score was standardized as a z-score prior to aggregation. The ACE composite was then computed as the arithmetic mean of the three standardized scores, allowing each dimension to contribute equally regardless of its original measurement scale.

Turnover intention was measured using the six-item Turnover Intention Scale-6 (TIS-6; Bothma & Roodt, 2013). The instrument assesses the extent to which employees contemplate leaving their organization. Items were rated on a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Participants were instructed to respond with their current or most recent nonprofit position in mind. Internal consistency reliability in the present sample was $\alpha = 0.805$.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS, version 31. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize participant characteristics and examine the distributional properties of the study variables. Internal consistency reliability was assessed for each scale using Cronbach's alpha.

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships among authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention. Multiple regression analyses were then performed to evaluate the predictive relationships between the ACE dimensions and turnover intention. In addition to examining authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as individual predictors, a standardized composite ACE score was created to evaluate the predictive utility of the integrated ACE model. Statistical significance was evaluated using an alpha level of 0.05.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics

The final analytic sample consisted of 46 participants who met the eligibility requirements. Participants represented a range of demographic backgrounds, educational attainment levels, organizational roles, and nonprofit employment experiences. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Demographics (N = 46).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
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

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Nonprofit 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

Note. Demographic characteristics are based on the 46 participants who remained following initial screening procedures. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability estimates, and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 2. All study measures demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.805 to 0.885.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability, and Correlations Among Variables (N = 46).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Authenticity	4.42	0.15	(0.885)			
2. Competence	5.33	0.55	0.514 ***	(0.864)		
3. Emotional Intelligence	3.17	0.17	0.637 ***	0.570 ***	(0.879)	
4. Turnover Intention	2.90	0.66	0.034	0.091	0.037	(0.805)

Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients appear on the diagonal in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$.

None of the ACE dimensions were significantly correlated with turnover intention. Correlations between authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention were small in magnitude and nonsignificant (all $p > 0.05$). In contrast, authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence were significantly and positively correlated with one another ($r = 0.514$ to 0.637 , all $p < 0.001$), indicating meaningful associations among the ACE dimensions.

3.3. Multiple Regression Analysis

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 3. The regression model was not statistically significant, $F(3, 42) = 0.12$, $p = 0.946$, and accounted for a negligible proportion of variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = 0.009$, adjusted $R^2 = -0.062$).

Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting Turnover Intention From ACE Individually (N = 46).

Predictor	B	SE B	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
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. $R = 0.093$; $R^2 = 0.009$; Adjusted $R^2 = -0.062$; $F(3, 42) = 0.12$, $p = 0.946$; SE of estimate = 0.685.

None of the ACE dimensions demonstrated a statistically significant unique association with turnover intention. Authenticity ($\beta = -0.009$, $p = 0.965$), competence ($\beta = 0.106$,

$p = 0.585$), and emotional intelligence ($\beta = -0.018$, $p = 0.935$) were not significant predictors. Collinearity diagnostics indicated no evidence of multicollinearity (all VIF values < 2.0). Accordingly, the hypotheses predicting negative relationships between the individual ACE dimensions and turnover intention were not supported.

3.4. ACE Composite Model

To evaluate the ACE model as an integrated framework, standardized authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence scores were combined to create a composite ACE score. A simple linear regression was conducted to examine the relationship between the ACE composite and turnover intention. Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Simple Regression Predicting Turnover Intention From ACE Composite (N = 46).

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	2.898	0.099		29.31	<0.001
ACE	0.050	0.118	0.064	0.424	0.673

Note. $R = 0.064$; $R^2 = 0.004$; Adjusted $R^2 = -0.019$; $F(1, 44) = 0.18$, $p = 0.673$.

The ACE composite did not significantly predict turnover intention, $F(1, 44) = 0.18$, $p = 0.673$, accounting for less than 1% of the variance in the outcome ($R^2 = 0.004$). The standardized regression coefficient was small and nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.064$, $p = 0.673$), indicating that the composite ACE score was not associated with turnover intention in the present sample. Thus, the hypothesis that the ACE composite would significantly predict turnover intention was not supported.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overview of Findings

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 significantly predict turnover intention. None of these hypotheses were supported. In the multiple regression model, the three ACE dimensions collectively explained less than 1% of the variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = 0.009$), and none demonstrated statistically significant unique predictive effects. Similarly, the ACE composite explained less than 1% of the variance in turnover intention in the simple regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.004$).

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. Given the modest analytic sample, however, these null findings should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that no relationships exist, as limited statistical power may have reduced the study's ability to detect small-to-moderate effects.

4.2. Evidence of Conceptual and Structural Coherence

One of the most notable findings of the present study was the moderate-to-strong positive relationships observed among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence. Although neither the individual ACE dimensions nor the composite ACE score significantly predicted turnover intention, the three competencies demonstrated strong internal reliability and statistically significant intercorrelations. These findings suggest

that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence function as related, but distinct, leadership-related capacities operating within individuals.

Beyond hypothesis testing, these findings provide important insight into the internal configuration of the ACE model. The observed intercorrelations indicate that individuals reporting higher levels of one competency also tended to report higher levels of the others. This pattern is particularly noteworthy because the ACE model was developed by identifying recurring characteristics associated with effective leadership across multiple leadership perspectives rather than from any single leadership theory. Despite their distinct conceptual origins and separate operationalization in the present study, authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence demonstrated meaningful empirical relationships within the sample. Collectively, these findings suggest that the competencies comprising the ACE model may function in a complementary manner without sacrificing their conceptual distinctiveness.

Importantly, structural coherence should not be conflated with unidimensionality. The observed relationships among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence do not suggest that the three competencies collapse into a single indistinguishable construct. Rather, the pattern of associations supports the conceptualization of the ACE model as a constellation of related but distinct leadership-related capacities. This distinction is central to the theoretical integrity of the ACE model. A unidimensional structure would imply redundancy, whereas a coherent multidimensional structure reflects integration without redundancy. Accordingly, the value of the ACE model lies in the proposition that these conceptually distinct competencies may function together while maintaining their theoretical uniqueness.

The observed relationships among the ACE dimensions are also consistent with the theoretical rationale provided by Self-Determination Theory (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As discussed earlier, SDT proposes that autonomous functioning is supported through the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While the present study did not directly test these psychological mechanisms, the coordinated relationships among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence are consistent with the possibility that these competencies operate through related processes of self-regulation, perceived capability, and interpersonal functioning. Accordingly, SDT remains a useful explanatory framework for understanding why these competencies may function together, even though it should not be interpreted as evidence that ACE is itself an operationalization of SDT.

Collectively, these findings provide preliminary evidence of the conceptual and structural coherence of the ACE model while simultaneously clarifying its current boundaries. The present study does not establish ACE as a validated latent construct, nor does it demonstrate predictive validity with respect to turnover intention. Rather, it provides an initial empirical indication that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may function as an integrated constellation of leadership-related capacities worthy of continued theoretical development and psychometric investigation.

4.3. ACE and Turnover Intention

Contrary to the proposed hypotheses, neither the individual ACE dimensions nor the composite ACE score demonstrated significant predictive relationships with turnover intention. These findings indicate that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence, as conceptualized in the present study, did not explain meaningful variance in employees' intentions to remain with or leave their nonprofit organizations. While these results did not support the proposed predictive relationships, they provide important empirical boundaries regarding the direct explanatory capacity of the ACE model within the context examined.

The findings also reinforce the complexity of turnover intention as an organizational outcome. Turnover intention has long been conceptualized as a multifaceted cognitive process shaped by interacting individual, organizational, and contextual influences rather than any single determinant (Allen et al., 2003; Mano-Negrin & Tzafrir, 2004; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Within nonprofit organizations, employees often operate in environments characterized by funding instability, resource constraints, workload demands, and compensation limitations, all of which may contribute to retention-related decisions independent of individual leadership capacities (National Council of Nonprofits, 2023; Price, 2026; Strub, 2020). Consequently, the absence of significant predictive relationships should not be interpreted as evidence that authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence lack organizational relevance. Instead, it suggests that these competencies alone may be insufficient to account for the complexity of turnover intention within nonprofit work settings.

The selection of turnover intention as the criterion variable remained appropriate given the study's overarching objective of addressing employee retention within nonprofit organizations. However, the present findings suggest that turnover intention may represent a particularly complex outcome through which to evaluate an emerging leadership framework. As discussed previously, the ACE dimensions demonstrated meaningful empirical relationships with one another despite their lack of predictive association with turnover intention. This pattern suggests that the model's theoretical value may reside less in directly explaining retention-related cognitions than in providing an integrated framework for understanding internally regulated leadership capacities whose influence on organizational outcomes may be indirect, conditional, or contextually bounded.

4.4. Implications

The present findings also extend the conceptual discussion introduced earlier regarding leadership as an individual capacity rather than solely a positional role. Rather than examining how leaders influence employees, this study examined whether leadership-related competencies operating within employees themselves were associated with a retention-related outcome. Although the hypothesized relationship with turnover intention was not supported, the observed relationships among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence suggest that these competencies may function as an interconnected system within individuals. As such, the findings support continued investigation of leadership capacities at the employee level while broadening the conversation beyond formal leadership positions.

By empirically examining authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as an integrated framework rather than as isolated constructs, the present study contributes to a growing discussion regarding how leadership capacity may be conceptualized within organizations. The present findings suggest that leadership-related capacities may also be understood as internally regulated competencies operating within employees regardless of role or title. Although the findings do not establish the ACE model as a validated leadership construct, they provide preliminary evidence supporting its conceptual coherence and continued theoretical development.

The findings also carry important implications for nonprofit organizations. Initiatives for developing leadership capacity in nonprofit settings should be viewed as complementary rather than corrective. Prior research suggests that developing authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence may contribute to day-to-day functioning, collaboration, and adaptive performance; however, these outcomes were not examined in the present study and should therefore be evaluated in future research. At the same time, retention challenges rooted in structural realities require organizational solutions. Taken together with prior research, the present findings suggest the importance of examining leadership

capacity alongside organizational design, rather than assuming that improvements in one domain will compensate for deficiencies in the other.

By empirically testing individual-level leadership competencies within a nonprofit workforce, this study further suggests that developing leadership capacity should not be evaluated solely through turnover metrics. Turnover intention represents a multifaceted decision process shaped by attitudinal and structural influences (Allen et al., 2003; Mano-Negrin & Tzafrir, 2004; Tett & Meyer, 1993). The absence of a direct predictive relationship with turnover intention therefore does not diminish the developmental relevance of authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence. Rather, it suggests that the value of cultivating these competencies may be more appropriately evaluated through broader indicators of employee and organizational functioning than through retention outcomes alone.

More broadly, the findings suggest that leadership capacity may be foundational rather than outcome-specific. Authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence remain theoretically grounded in established psychological literature and represent capacities that influence how individuals interpret experiences, respond to challenges, and engage with others (Bandura, 1982; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008). Their influence on organizational outcomes may therefore be indirect, cumulative, or contingent upon organizational context rather than immediately observable through any single outcome variable.

Collectively, these findings encourage a more nuanced understanding of leadership capacity—one that distinguishes between cultivating internal leadership capacity and achieving specific organizational outcomes. While the present study does not support the use of the ACE model as a direct predictor of turnover intention, it provides an initial empirical foundation for future research examining whether authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence function as complementary leadership-related capacities across outcomes extending beyond employee retention.

4.5. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Data were collected at a single point in time, preventing conclusions regarding the temporal ordering between authenticity, competence, emotional intelligence, and turnover intention. Although the theoretical framework proposed that these leadership-related competencies would influence turnover intention, it is also possible that employees with lower turnover intention perceive themselves more positively on these internal capacities. Without longitudinal data, directional inferences cannot be established.

Second, all primary variables were assessed using validated self-report instruments (Bothma & Roodt, 2013; Rigotti et al., 2008; Salovey et al., 1995; Wood et al., 2008). Although these measures demonstrated strong internal reliability within the present sample, reliance on a single method of data collection introduces the possibility of common method variance and self-perception bias (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Accordingly, the observed relationships should be interpreted as reflecting participants' perceptions of their leadership-related capacities rather than objective behavioral assessments.

Third, the relatively small sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Although participants represented a range of nonprofit organizations and demographic backgrounds, the results should be interpreted cautiously until replicated with larger and more diverse samples.

Fourth, the inclusion of both current and former nonprofit employees introduces a temporal distinction in the interpretation of turnover intention. Whereas current employees reported prospective intentions regarding their present employment, former employees

retrospectively reported their intentions during their most recent nonprofit employment. Combining these responses may therefore introduce retrospective recall or knowledge-of-outcome effects among former employees that are not present for current employees. The two groups were not analyzed separately; therefore, the present study cannot determine whether the relationships between the ACE dimensions and turnover intention differ between current and former employees. Accordingly, turnover intention should be interpreted as reflecting participants' reported intentions within the employment context referenced at the time of response rather than as a uniformly prospective measure across the full sample.

Finally, the present study evaluated the ACE model as an integrated framework predicting turnover intention rather than as a distinct latent construct. While the findings provide initial evidence supporting the model's conceptual and structural coherence, they should not be interpreted as establishing construct validity. Rather, the present study represents an initial empirical examination of the ACE model and its relationship with a retention-related outcome.

4.6. Future Research

The present study represents an initial empirical evaluation of the ACE model and suggests several directions for future investigation. Although the model demonstrated meaningful conceptual and structural coherence, additional research is needed to determine the extent to which authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence function as an integrated leadership framework across organizational settings and outcome domains.

A logical next step is the psychometric evaluation of the ACE model as a distinct multidimensional construct. The present study examined the three competencies as coordinated predictors of turnover intention but was not designed to establish ACE as a latent variable. Future research should therefore evaluate the model using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to determine whether authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence demonstrate sufficient convergent and discriminant validity to justify conceptualization as a higher-order leadership construct. Such work would provide an important foundation for subsequent theoretical refinement and empirical application.

The present findings also suggest that turnover intention may not represent the most appropriate criterion variable through which to evaluate the ACE model. Although turnover remains a critically important organizational outcome, it is influenced by a complex interaction of individual, organizational, and contextual factors. Future studies should therefore examine ACE in relation to outcomes more directly associated with internally regulated leadership capacities, including employee engagement, psychological well-being, occupational commitment, resilience, job performance, leadership effectiveness, and job satisfaction. Identifying the outcomes most strongly associated with ACE will help clarify the framework's theoretical scope and practical utility.

Longitudinal research would further strengthen understanding of the relationships among the ACE dimensions and organizational outcomes. Because authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence are capacities that may develop over time through experience, reflection, and intentional development, longitudinal designs would permit examination of how changes in these competencies relate to subsequent changes in employee attitudes, behaviors, and workplace outcomes. Such designs may also help clarify potential mediating and moderating mechanisms that could not be evaluated within the present cross-sectional study.

Future research should also examine the ACE model beyond nonprofit organizations. Although the nonprofit sector provided an appropriate context for the present investigation because of its persistent retention challenges, the theoretical rationale underlying the

model is not sector specific. Replication across public, private, governmental, healthcare, educational, and military settings would help determine whether the relationships observed in the present study generalize across organizational contexts or whether the relevance of ACE varies according to occupational or environmental conditions.

Finally, continued refinement of the ACE model itself remains an important opportunity for future scholarship. The present study provides initial empirical support for conceptual coherence but should be viewed as the beginning rather than the culmination of theory development. Future investigations should examine the boundaries of the framework, explore potential interactions among its constituent competencies, and evaluate whether additional leadership-related capacities meaningfully strengthen or clarify the model. Through continued theoretical refinement and empirical validation, the ACE model may contribute to a broader understanding of leadership as an internally regulated capacity operating throughout organizations rather than solely within positions of formal authority.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on leadership and retention in the nonprofit sector by introducing the ACE model as a reconceptualization of leadership capacity. By framing authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence as internal, self-regulated dimensions accessible to all employees, the model challenges traditional hierarchies and expands leadership beyond positional authority. Although the findings did not demonstrate a direct predictive relationship between ACE capacities and turnover intention, the observed interrelationships among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence provide an empirical basis for continued examination of the model as a framework for understanding individual-level, leadership-related capacities that may contribute to self-leadership within organizational contexts.

The absence of a statistically significant link between ACE and turnover intention reinforces the multifaceted and systemic nature of employee retention in nonprofit organizations. Employee turnover is not solely an individual-level phenomenon; rather, it is shaped by deeply embedded structural and organizational conditions, including financial and funding instability, limited advancement opportunities, and workload pressures. These factors operate at organizational and sector-wide levels, often rendering individual capacities insufficient to counterbalance the broader challenges employees face. As such, the findings caution against over-reliance on individual development interventions as standalone solutions to retention challenges.

The observance of strong intercorrelations identified among authenticity, competence, and emotional intelligence suggests that the ACE model offers meaningful insights into the internal dynamics of leadership capacity development. Future studies may evaluate the extent to which these capacities can enhance self-regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and adaptive functioning. For nonprofit leaders and practitioners, this highlights the value of cultivating internal leadership capacities not as a remedy for structural deficiencies, but as a complementary strategy that strengthens organizational culture, collaboration, and employee resilience.

For researchers, this study invites a more nuanced approach to leadership scholarship that integrates individual-level capacities with organizational and contextual variables on multiple levels. Future research should explore how internal leadership models like ACE interact with structural reforms, such as improved compensation systems, workload redistribution, and sustainable funding strategies. For nonprofit leaders, the implication is that meaningful reductions in turnover will likely require an approach that combines investment in employee development with intentional efforts to address systemic organizational constraints. Key principles may include openness to change and clear communication as

vital drivers for aligning individual efforts with a broader organizational purpose (Worley, 2018). In doing so, the sector can move toward a more holistic, sustainable model of workforce stability and leadership practice.

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