



WHEN LEADERSHIP FAILS TO SUPPORT: WORKPLACE STRESS, MOTIVATION LOSS, AND TURNOVER AMONG LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY MIDDLE MANAGERS

Jason Stroman, PhD Capella University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4124-762X>

Abstract

Employee turnover remains a persistent organizational challenge with significant implications for employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, and leadership practice. Although the landscape industry experiences particularly high rates of middle manager turnover, limited research has examined how leadership-related experiences influence retention within this sector. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how workplace stress, motivation loss, and leadership practices contribute to turnover among middle managers in the U.S. landscape industry. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 middle managers representing three large landscape organizations and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that workplace stress associated with sales expectations, budget pressures, and contract losses contributed to motivation loss and turnover intentions. However, participants consistently framed these challenges within broader experiences of leadership and organizational culture. Across all three organizations, participants described perceptions of inadequate organizational support, limited communication, diminished trust in leadership, unfair accountability practices, and a lack of psychological safety. Viewed through a human-centered leadership lens, the findings suggest that employee retention is influenced not only by workplace demands but also by how employees experience leadership, organizational care, fairness, and support. This study contributes to leadership scholarship by extending understanding of how trust, psychological safety, employee well-being, and perceptions of organizational support shape retention decisions. The findings highlight the importance of leadership approaches grounded in empathy, transparency, ethical care, and relational trust for fostering employee commitment and organizational resilience. Practical implications suggest that organizations seeking to improve retention should prioritize leadership practices that support employee flourishing alongside organizational performance objectives.

Keywords: human-centered leadership, employee well-being, psychological safety, trust, employee retention, workplace stress, motivation, organizational support, middle managers, landscape industry

Recommended Citation:

Stroman, J. (2026). When leadership fails to support: Workplace stress, motivation loss, and turnover among landscape industry middle managers. *Journal of Integrative Leadership Studies*, 1(1), 13–34.
<https://doi.org/10.65274/jils.v1i1.001>



Introduction

Organizational turnover is an ongoing issue across many industries (Garazi et al, 2015). Turnover has the potential to cause loss of production as well as loss of revenue. Turnover increases costs due to the need to train new employees who have to fill empty positions resulting from turnover (Call et al., 2015). Employee turnover remains a significant organizational challenge across industries. Recent workforce analyses indicate that voluntary turnover continues to impose substantial financial and operational costs on organizations, with employee replacement costs often ranging from one-half to two times an employee's annual salary depending on position complexity and training requirements (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2024). Previous studies have highlighted possible reasons for turnover, including motivation loss, production loss, stress, and inadequate manager-employee relationships (Arekar et al., 2016; Hale et. al., 2016; Hanna, 2017; Mohammadipour et. al, 2016; Wiltermoth & Flynn, 2013). While previous studies cite problems associated with industrial turnover, no studies have specifically explored turnover in the green industry or landscape industry. Recent evidence suggests that managers account for approximately 70% of the variance in employee engagement, underscoring the critical role leadership plays in shaping employee experiences, motivation, and retention (Gallup, 2024).

While turnover is often examined through economic and human resource management perspectives, leadership scholarship increasingly recognizes employee retention as a reflection of organizational culture, employee well-being, trust, and leadership practices (Inceoglu et al., 2023; Pirson, 2023). Human-centered leadership perspectives suggest that employee decisions to remain with or leave an organization are influenced not only by workplace demands but also by how employees experience support, fairness, dignity, and care within organizational systems. Contemporary workforce research suggests that retention challenges are increasingly linked to employee experiences of leadership, organizational culture, workplace well-being, and psychological safety. Employees who perceive supportive leadership and meaningful organizational care are more likely to remain committed to their organizations despite workplace pressures (Gallup, 2024; Inceoglu et al., 2023).

The green industry, which includes landscape services, remains a significant contributor to the U.S. economy. Recent estimates indicate that the landscape services sector employs more than one million workers nationwide and continues to experience persistent workforce and retention challenges (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2024). The landscape industry suffers from a turnover rate of 30% or more each year, with poor retention of middle and upper managers (IBIS World, 2016). The landscape services industry has continued to expand in recent years, generating well over \$150 billion in annual revenue and supporting a growing workforce across residential, commercial, and municipal sectors (National Association of Landscape Professionals [NALP], 2024). Research has indicated that the problem rests in a general lack of understanding of why high turnover occurs with landscape industry middle managers and, subsequently, that a lack of strategies exists to prevent turnover from occurring (Stroman, 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to understand how workplace stress, motivation loss, and leadership-related experiences contribute to turnover among landscape industry middle



managers. Turnover costs are approximately 16% of an employee's annual salary for employees making under \$30,000 a year, and those costs rise to 20% of an annual salary to replace an employee earning between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year. Improving the understanding of the turnover of landscape industry middle managers has the potential to improve retention within that position, resulting in organizational cost savings and employee job stability.

Background Literature

Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights how fulfillment of employee needs can motivate individuals to perform tasks that the employee otherwise might not have completed (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2007). Employees tend to try to fulfill multiple levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs simultaneously and often look for employment that can accommodate them (Sindhu & Sindhu, 2014). At the same time, individuals also tend to leave a company, or turnover, when those needs are not met (Sindhu & Sindhu, 2014). Research highlights a multitude of reasons for the existence of organizational turnover, with stress and loss of motivation as two of the more common ones (Arekar et al., 2016; Hale et al., 2016; Hanna, 2017; Mohammadipour et al., 2016; Wiltermoth & Flynn, 2013).

Workplace stress is a common phenomenon across industries; however, long hours and performance demands can increase negative stress levels of employees (Burnett & Pettijohn, 2015). Increased negative stress can, in turn, lead to an eventual need to leave a position in an attempt at overall stress reduction (Burnett & Pettijohn, 2015). Therefore, negative stress is often disruptive and can lead to loss of production, engagement, work satisfaction, and eventual turnover, particularly in situations where employees attempt to reduce their workplace stress levels (Alit and Kakakhel, 2013; Burnett & Pettijohn, 2015; Florea & Florea, 2016). Prolonged exposure to workplace stress may contribute to employee burnout, which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional effectiveness. Burnout has been consistently associated with diminished job satisfaction, reduced motivation, and increased turnover intentions (Montano et al., 2021). Burnout continues to be a widespread organizational concern. Recent workforce surveys indicate that a majority of employees report experiencing symptoms of burnout, with burnout strongly associated with decreased engagement, lower job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Deloitte, 2024).

At times, management can inadvertently add to workplace stress. Managers tend to push employees to work harder and be more productive, but this same push can lead to demotivation and increased stress (Dubey et al., 2017). Saleem et al. (2015) found that as workplace stress increases, motivation often decreases, resulting in an intent to quit. Both the intent to quit and loss of motivation can occur even when there is simply a perception of stress (Bryson et al., 2013). Bryson et al. (2013) explored the impact of stress in teams of middle managers and found that stress can lead to change within an organization and, as that change occurs, more stress is created in the work environment, creating a cycle of change and stress. When added to an already stressful environment, an increase in turnover and resistance to any other future change within the organization ensued (Bryson et al., 2013).

Like stress, motivational levels impact and are impacted by turnover (Wilcox et al., 2016). Loss of production and increased intent to quit can occur due to a lack of management motivational plans (Wilcox et al., 2016). At the same time, proper motivation can increase both engagement and employee loyalty, while



simultaneously decreasing the intent to quit (Core, 2014). Thus, managers play a pivotal role in properly motivating employees, and some management techniques are better than others in terms of trying to increase motivation (Vele et al., 2014).

In general, negative perceptions of management can decrease motivation and increase the intent to quit among employees. Wilthermoth & Flynn (2013) found that within the banking industry, the majority of the turnover was caused by management misusing and abusing their position of power. Attributes such as favoritism, abuse of power, and social inequalities have been found to cause an increase in turnover and loss of motivation (Rosenblatt, 2012; Tost et al., 2013). Parker (2014) found that oppressive managers can also impact other areas of an organization (Parker, 2014). Likewise, affluent manager attitudes have been shown to increase an employer-manager divide (Lockett et al., 2013). Thus, these studies and others have illustrated that a poor manager attitude causes a disconnect between employee and manager, which in turn, can increase turnover, or at least turnover intent (Lockett et al., 2013).

When turnover does occur, organizational change, to some extent, often follows. When faced with organizational change, employees often also face increased stress, decreased motivation, and turnover increases as a result (Bordia et al., 2013; Bryson et al., 2013; Guha & Chakrabarti, 2016). Additionally, when managers themselves are the ones turning over, a further increase in the intent to quit and loss of motivation among employees occurs (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2016). For example, Guha and Chakrabarti (2016) found that in some circumstances, manager turnover made employees so unhappy and distraught that they lost all motivation to keep up production, as well as thought about quitting the organization themselves. Soebbing et al. (2015) found an increase in turnover and loss of motivation when there was a strong attachment between current employees and the past manager; and the connection between manager and employees can be so strong that when the manager leaves, employees can, in some cases, develop depression (Soebbing et al., 2015). Thus, management turnover can have a more damaging and cyclical impact on employee stress, motivation, and potential turnover.

Human-centered leadership places employee dignity, well-being, trust, and ethical care at the center of organizational decision-making (Pirson, 2023). Recent leadership scholarship has increasingly identified employee well-being as both an ethical responsibility and a strategic organizational outcome. Leaders who prioritize employee well-being contribute to greater engagement, organizational commitment, and sustainable performance outcomes (Inceoglu et al., 2023). Rather than viewing employees solely as contributors to organizational productivity, human-centered leadership recognizes that employees' psychological, emotional, and social experiences directly influence organizational effectiveness. This perspective aligns with responsible leadership approaches that emphasize stakeholder relationships, trust, and shared value creation (Maak & Pless, 2006).

Human-centered leadership also shares characteristics with servant leadership, ethical leadership, and compassionate leadership approaches, all of which emphasize care, support, and employee development (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Eva et al., 2019; Worline & Dutton, 2017). Contemporary research on compassionate leadership suggests that leaders who demonstrate empathy, support, and concern for employee well-being foster stronger trust relationships and improve employee engagement, resilience, and retention outcomes (West, 2022). Leadership practices that communicate fairness, transparency, and



support contribute to employee trust and organizational commitment, whereas leadership behaviors perceived as punitive, unfair, or unsupportive may increase stress, reduce motivation, and contribute to turnover intentions (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

Psychological safety represents another important leadership-related factor associated with employee retention. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as a shared belief that individuals can express concerns, ask questions, and acknowledge mistakes without fear of punishment or negative consequences. Organizations characterized by psychological safety often experience higher levels of trust, communication, engagement, and employee well-being. Conversely, workplaces characterized by blame, fear of termination, or punitive responses to mistakes may undermine psychological safety and contribute to employee stress, disengagement, and turnover. The experiences described by middle managers in high-pressure environments suggest that perceptions of psychological safety may influence how employees respond to organizational demands and workplace challenges. Recent evidence suggests that psychological safety is associated with employee retention, workplace resilience, and organizational learning. Employees who perceive psychologically safe environments are more likely to communicate concerns, remain engaged, and maintain commitment to the organization during periods of stress and uncertainty (Newman et al., 2020). Within the context of employee retention, leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee perceptions of support, fairness, and organizational care. Consequently, workplace stress, motivation loss, and turnover may be understood not only as operational challenges but also as outcomes influenced by leadership systems and organizational culture.

Collectively, these perspectives suggest that employee turnover cannot be understood solely through motivation or stress frameworks. Human-centered leadership, psychological safety, trust, and employee well-being may shape how employees interpret workplace stressors and organizational demands. Consequently, workplace stress and motivation loss may be viewed not only as individual experiences but also as outcomes influenced by leadership practices and organizational culture. This study contributes to leadership scholarship by extending understanding of how middle managers experience workplace stress, motivation loss, and turnover within organizational environments shaped by leadership practices. By examining turnover through a human-centered leadership lens, the study connects employee well-being, trust, and organizational support to retention outcomes in an industry that has received limited scholarly attention. The present study is informed primarily by Human-Centered Leadership Theory (Pirson, 2023) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how leadership practices influence employee well-being, motivation, perceptions of support, and ultimately retention decisions.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how workplace stress, motivation loss, and leadership-related experiences contribute to turnover among middle managers in the U.S. landscape industry. Specifically, this study explored how middle managers perceived organizational support, leadership practices, and workplace expectations and how those perceptions influenced decisions to remain with or leave an organization. This study included three major U.S. landscape companies that have experienced high middle manager turnover, with each company representing a separate case in the study.



The data collection for this multiple-case study included semi-structured interviews as the main source of data collection, with publicly available archival data from the case companies' 10Ks and websites to explore publicly available company information on revenue, turnover, and employees. The companies chosen for each case had at least 1 million in yearly revenue and at least 100 employees. Middle managers were defined as anyone who has at least three direct reports. Participants were identified through established contacts within the landscape industry. The purposive sampling strategy incorporated into this study included the following criteria: the participants had to work, or have worked, at one of the three landscape industry case companies included in this study, participants had to be a middle manager, and the participants must have been familiar with the turnover within their company. A total of 15 participants were identified as meeting the above criteria used for this study. Initial contact was made via personal email, Facebook, or personal phone call to avoid any contact with the companies themselves and to add a layer of protection for the participants. Follow-up interviews occurred on a need basis to clarify information. Member checking was incorporated to enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings. At that point, participants had the opportunity to clarify or add any pertinent or additional information. This process continued until no new information was gained by the data collection, and data saturation was achieved.

Data were coded and analyzed in NVivo and coding using the numbers 1, 2, and 3 to individual cases, and letters A, B, C, D, and E to individual participants. This gave an alphanumeric combination where the number denoted the case, and a letter indicated the participant. For example, 1B would be case one, participant B. Coding was used in this study to minimize the risk to the participants. The information that the participants had the potential to be sensitive and put the company or industry they work for in a negative light, so coding was necessary to protect them. Nowhere in this study were any names of participants or companies written down or used. Common themes of the coded data were expressed within NVivo, as well as recurring themes and statements. To enhance trustworthiness, the study incorporated member checking, triangulation through archival data, detailed documentation of coding procedures, and systematic comparison of themes across cases. These procedures helped improve the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Results

A central objective of this study was to understand the factors contributing to turnover among landscape industry middle managers. This question was important because preliminary research indicated that the current management personnel did not understand why the turnover existed to the extent that it did within the landscape industry. While many reasons for turnover likely exist, the most common themes revealed through the interviews were pressure to meet or exceed all sales numbers each month, pressure to meet or exceed budget each month, and the loss of contracts.

Sales

One of the biggest drivers of the landscape industry was the ability to sell new work and grow the business. It was one of the tasks that every middle manager was responsible for. The amount that each manager had to sell, or the cumulative total of the entire branch, often changed from month to month and was dependent on external factors, like the time of year and the overall monthly budget.



Participants stated that the pressure to sell and the sometimes lack of sales caused turnover within the position. One of the findings in this study was the middle managers' perceptions of how the upper managers viewed sales. An expressed feeling that reoccurred from participants was that the upper management did not look at or take into consideration the past sales. "One month you could beat the sales budget by double or triple, but if the next month you fall short, there would be a reprimand and potential termination if the budget was missed by a wide enough margin." Another participant put it as "There was a very big 'what have you done for me today' mentality."

Budget

One other popular response for the cause of turnover is the inability to stay within budget. More so than not being able to stay within budget but not being able to stay within budget while being told that equipment, or personnel can be replaced. "It was really tough to hit budget when I was short on guys, mowers, or trucks and had to work overtime to complete all of the contracted work."

Broken equipment was a topic that was common in the responses. Some of the responses were that the equipment was old and needed to be replaced, it took too long to get equipment repaired, no backups existed, and no foreseen plan to replace any equipment. "We had old equipment that was constantly breaking, and it took forever to get it repaired. We were told we could not replace it. We were told there was no plan in the future to replace it."

Middle managers felt that the concerns they had were not being considered. This led to either being directly terminated for not hitting budget or sales goals, or to a loss of motivation and the intent to look for employment elsewhere. "I was so frustrated that I was thinking about leaving to go somewhere else."

Loss of Contracts

The most popular participant response was that turnover was caused by loss of contract. Sometimes the contracts were lost because of manager oversight. However, participants felt that sometimes the circumstances were out of their control as middle managers. These factors included a lack of equipment, time, and a contract going out for rebidding. "I was let go because a contract was rebid for a lower price and we could not meet the lowest price. I was let go because of that loss."

A budget can restrict how much equipment can be replaced or repaired or can restrict the amount of overtime that is allowed. When this sometimes occurs, a middle manager cannot get all of the contracted work completed at the scheduled time. The loss of contract under these circumstances is directly the fault of the manager, and termination is common. The perception is that with hands tied and restrictions in place, the middle managers were set up to fail. "When a truck is broken, all of the work cannot get done without overtime. Then I am told no overtime. So, contracts get lost, I get blamed and let go."

Contracts are lost because of rebidding. Rebidding is a process where the contract holder shops around for a lower price or more services for the same price. This was something that the middle manager in this study felt was very unfair to them. "I have no control over what other companies can bid or what I can bid. If I lose a contract to a lower price, how is that my fault?"



Across all three cases, participant narratives revealed recurring concerns regarding trust and organizational support. Although participants frequently discussed sales goals, budgets, and contract losses, their descriptions often reflected broader perceptions of fairness, support, and trust in leadership. Participants who felt blamed for circumstances outside their control frequently reported frustration, motivation loss, and intentions to seek alternative employment. These findings suggest that trust may serve as an important mechanism linking leadership practices, employee well-being, and turnover decisions. Viewed collectively, these findings suggest that participant experiences were shaped not only by operational pressures but also by perceptions of leadership support, fairness, communication, and organizational care. Across all three cases, participants consistently linked workplace stress and motivation loss to leadership-related experiences, indicating that leadership practices may play an important role in employee retention decisions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how workplace stress, motivation loss, and leadership-related experiences contribute to turnover among middle managers in the U.S. landscape industry. Consistent with previous turnover research, participants identified sales pressures, budget constraints, and contract losses as major sources of workplace stress. However, the findings suggest that turnover cannot be fully explained by operational demands alone. Rather, participants consistently described leadership-related experiences, including perceptions of inadequate support, unfair accountability practices, limited communication, and diminished trust, that shaped how they interpreted and responded to workplace challenges.

A notable finding was the remarkable consistency of participant experiences across all three organizations. Despite representing separate companies, participants described nearly identical concerns regarding performance expectations, accountability systems, and organizational support. This consistency suggests that turnover within the landscape industry may reflect broader leadership and cultural patterns rather than isolated organizational issues. Viewed through a human-centered leadership lens, the findings indicate that employees do not simply respond to workplace demands; they respond to how leadership structures, communicates, and supports employees while those demands are being experienced.

Participants frequently reported that contract losses, sales shortfalls, and budget challenges were attributed to them regardless of contextual factors outside of their control. These perceptions often generated frustration, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of helplessness. Such findings extend previous research linking workplace stress and turnover by demonstrating that leadership practices may influence whether operational pressures are experienced as manageable challenges or as punitive threats. In many cases, participants did not describe stress itself as the primary problem. Rather, they described organizational responses to stressors as unfair, unsupportive, or disconnected from workplace realities.

The findings also highlight the importance of trust as a central mechanism linking leadership and retention. Participants frequently expressed concerns that leadership failed to recognize prior accomplishments, consider contextual barriers, or communicate expectations transparently. These experiences contributed to diminished trust and perceptions that employees were valued primarily for short-



term performance outcomes rather than their broader contributions to the organization. Consistent with research on trust in leadership (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), participants who perceived leadership as unfair or unsupportive were more likely to report motivation loss and intentions to leave their organizations.

From a psychological safety perspective, the findings suggest that many participants experienced environments characterized by fear of failure rather than opportunities for learning and growth. Employees described concerns that mistakes, contract losses, or temporary performance declines could result in reprimand or termination. Such conditions may discourage open communication, reduce engagement, and increase emotional strain. Human-centered leadership emphasizes creating environments where employees feel respected, supported, and psychologically safe, particularly during periods of uncertainty or organizational pressure (Pirson, 2023). The absence of these conditions appeared to contribute significantly to participant dissatisfaction and turnover intentions.

The findings further underscore the emotional dimensions of leadership. Participants frequently described feelings of frustration, discouragement, anxiety, and being undervalued. These emotional experiences are important because they influence employee well-being, motivation, and organizational commitment. Leadership is not solely an operational function; it is also a relational process that shapes how employees experience their work environments. When leadership practices fail to communicate support, fairness, and care, employees may experience declining motivation and reduced commitment even when compensation and advancement opportunities remain available.

These findings align closely with emerging scholarship on human-centered, ethical, servant, and compassionate leadership. Across these perspectives, effective leadership is characterized by concern for employee well-being, dignity, development, and flourishing. Participants in this study often described environments where performance outcomes appeared to take precedence over employee experiences. Human-centered leadership does not eliminate accountability or organizational performance expectations; rather, it balances those expectations with empathy, fairness, trust, and organizational care. The findings suggest that organizations may improve retention not merely by reducing workload demands but by strengthening leadership practices that foster trust, psychological safety, communication, and employee well-being.

Collectively, the findings contribute to leadership scholarship by illustrating how employee turnover may reflect broader perceptions of organizational culture and leadership effectiveness. While operational pressures such as sales expectations and contract management remain important, the study suggests that leadership practices shape how employees interpret those pressures and whether they remain committed to the organization. Employee retention therefore emerges not only as a workforce management issue but also as a leadership challenge rooted in relationships, trust, and the human experience of work.

Human-Centered Leadership Implications

Viewed through a human-centered leadership lens, the findings suggest that turnover was not solely the result of operational challenges such as sales pressures, budgets, and contract losses. Rather, participants consistently described experiences involving perceived lack of support, limited organizational



care, inadequate communication, and unfair accountability practices. These experiences contributed to workplace stress, reduced motivation, and eventual turnover.

The findings indicate that leadership may influence employee well-being through both interpersonal interactions and organizational systems. Participants frequently expressed frustration when performance evaluations focused exclusively on short-term outcomes while disregarding contextual factors outside of their control. Such experiences may reduce trust in leadership and contribute to perceptions that employees are valued primarily for performance outcomes rather than as individuals. From an ethical leadership perspective, accountability systems should balance performance expectations with consideration of contextual factors that influence outcomes. Participants frequently described situations in which responsibility was assigned without consideration of resource limitations, contract rebidding processes, or organizational constraints, raising questions regarding perceptions of fairness and ethical treatment.

The findings also suggest opportunities for leadership development. Participants frequently described leadership-related experiences involving communication, accountability, trust, and support. These experiences indicate that leadership competencies associated with empathy, psychological safety, employee well-being, and relational communication may play an important role in retention outcomes. Leadership development initiatives that strengthen these competencies may contribute to healthier organizational cultures and improved employee experiences.

From a human-centered leadership perspective, organizations that demonstrate empathy, fairness, transparency, and support may be better positioned to reduce employee stress, sustain motivation, and improve retention. Leadership practices that prioritize employee well-being may therefore represent an important strategy for addressing turnover within the landscape industry and similar organizational contexts. Human-centered leadership scholarship increasingly emphasizes employee flourishing as an organizational objective, arguing that sustainable organizational performance is dependent upon environments that support dignity, well-being, growth, and meaningful work experiences (Pirson, 2023). Beyond reducing turnover, human-centered leadership seeks to create conditions that allow employees to flourish personally and professionally. Employee flourishing encompasses psychological well-being, meaningful work, growth opportunities, and positive workplace relationships. The findings suggest that participants often experienced environments characterized by pressure and fear rather than support and growth, highlighting opportunities for organizations to adopt leadership practices that foster employee flourishing alongside organizational performance.

Suggestions for Reducing Turnover

In this study, participants' perceptions were often that the reduction of pressure on the middle manager regarding contracts, sales, and budgets could reduce stress, loss of motivation, and, inevitably, turnover in the position. The perception was that regardless of past sales performance, managers were terminated if current sales budgets were not met. Results of this study indicate that landscape companies need to have a plan or a clearly laid-out document on what sales goals are, and then a set transparent consequence for not meeting those goals. These transparent performance goals should also be based on more than one month or one contract. When no such documents exist, only a snapshot of overall performance is



often measured. It could also be useful to incorporate a document or chart that explains sales in relation to termination. “I missed my sales and was let go even with doing great the past 3 weekly goals.” “I wish that in the beginning there was a chart or something explaining what or why you would get terminated, as I felt it was missed one week, and you're gone.”

Steps should also be taken by management teams to ensure that any negative perceptions are changed to positive ones (Jones et al., 2016). For example, Alotaibi (2014) studied manager/ subordinate relationships in the Saudi Arabian contracting industry and found that proper relationships and perception of the management led to great gain and growth, noting that perception of a manager's ability to motivate is as important as the perception of the ability to manage. Likewise, in the South African hospitality industry, the manager's perception of their ability to motivate was seen as valuable in keeping employees happy as a measure of the manager's overall ability (Scheers & Botha, 2014). Within the landscape industry, upper management training on motivation, coupled with the incorporation of long-term performance metrics, could reduce stress and improve middle manager motivation, thus creating a cyclical impact on stress reduction for lower-level employees; the result of which could have strong implications for positive social change by reducing employee turnover, benefiting both employee and employer alike.

Leadership Development and Employee Well-Being

The findings suggest that leadership development initiatives focused on communication, employee support, trust-building, and motivational leadership may contribute to improved retention outcomes. Managers who demonstrate empathy, transparency, and fairness may reduce employee stress while simultaneously increasing motivation and organizational commitment. Leadership training programs that emphasize human-centered leadership principles could help organizations develop workplace cultures that prioritize employee well-being alongside organizational performance objectives.

Finally, management teams need to assess the needs of the employees and put plans into place to make sure that those needs are being met. For example, one need that was not met was adequate equipment that helped employees perform jobs to a satisfactory level. This led to contract loss and turnover. Providing proper equipment would lead to the fulfilment of the middle manager's need to perform the work within a reasonable time frame. This could possibly keep the contract and revenue, reducing the turnover. Taken together, these findings suggest that employee retention is not simply a workforce management challenge but a leadership responsibility that reflects the quality of organizational relationships and the extent to which employees experience dignity, support, and trust in the workplace.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study included only 15 middle managers from three landscape organizations, which may limit transferability to other industries or organizational contexts. Second, the data were based on participant perceptions and retrospective accounts of workplace experiences, introducing the possibility of recall bias. Third, the study focused on middle managers and did not include perspectives from senior leaders or frontline employees. Finally, because the study was conducted within a specific industry context, future research is needed to



determine whether similar leadership, well-being, and retention dynamics exist in other sectors. Although transferability beyond the landscape industry should be approached cautiously, the findings may have relevance for other industries characterized by performance pressure, sales targets, and contract-dependent business models.

Future Research

Future research should directly examine the relationship between human-centered leadership and employee retention outcomes. Quantitative studies incorporating validated measures of human-centered leadership, trust, psychological safety, employee well-being, and organizational commitment may provide additional insight into the mechanisms linking leadership practices to turnover. Longitudinal studies could examine how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation and retention over time. Future qualitative research could also explore turnover experiences among employees at different organizational levels and across additional industries. Comparative studies examining organizations with high and low turnover rates may help identify leadership practices associated with improved employee retention and workplace well-being. Future research should also examine burnout, psychological safety, and employee well-being as potential mediating mechanisms between leadership practices and employee retention outcomes. Such research may provide greater insight into how human-centered leadership contributes to organizational resilience and long-term workforce stability.

Conclusion

This study explored how workplace stress, motivation loss, and leadership-related experiences influence turnover among middle managers in the U.S. landscape industry. While participants identified sales expectations, budget pressures, and contract losses as significant sources of workplace stress, the findings suggest that turnover decisions are shaped by more than operational demands alone. Across all three organizations, participants consistently described concerns related to organizational support, communication, trust, fairness, and accountability, highlighting the central role leadership plays in shaping employee experiences.

Viewed through a human-centered leadership perspective, the findings suggest that employees are more likely to remain committed to organizations when they perceive leadership as supportive, transparent, fair, and genuinely concerned with employee well-being. Conversely, environments characterized by fear of failure, limited support, and perceived inequities may contribute to diminished motivation, emotional exhaustion, and increased turnover intentions. The findings indicate that workplace stress becomes particularly harmful when employees perceive that organizational systems and leadership practices fail to acknowledge contextual realities, support employee success, or foster trusting relationships.

This study contributes to a growing body of leadership scholarship emphasizing that employee retention is not merely a human resource challenge but a reflection of organizational culture and leadership effectiveness. The findings extend human-centered leadership theory by illustrating how trust, psychological safety, employee well-being, and perceptions of organizational care influence employee decisions to remain



with or leave an organization. In doing so, the study demonstrates that leadership practices shape not only organizational outcomes but also the lived experiences of employees.

The implications extend beyond the landscape industry. Organizations across sectors increasingly operate in environments characterized by performance pressures, uncertainty, and workforce retention challenges. Under such conditions, leadership approaches grounded in empathy, ethical care, transparency, and employee development may serve as critical resources for sustaining both organizational performance and employee well-being. Human-centered leadership does not require organizations to choose between people and performance; rather, it recognizes that sustainable performance is achieved through the cultivation of trust, dignity, meaningful work, and supportive organizational relationships.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that employee retention is fundamentally relational. Employees remain not only because of compensation, advancement opportunities, or job responsibilities, but because of how they experience leadership and whether they feel valued, supported, and respected within the organization. As organizations continue to navigate complex workplace challenges, leadership practices that prioritize human flourishing alongside organizational effectiveness may prove essential for building resilient, engaged, and sustainable workplaces.

References

- Alit, N., & Kakakhel, S. J. (2013). Relationship between occupational stress and organizational commitment (empirical evidence from the pharmaceuticals industry). *Journal of Managerial Sciences*, 7(2), 291-298. <http://jms.nonolympictimes.org>
- Arekar, K., Jain, R., Desphande, B., & Sherin, P. (2016). Relationship between individual and structural determinants of job satisfaction: analysis of employee turnover in the Indian context. *Journal of Developing Areas*, 50, 387-398. <https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/258>
- Bordia, P., Restubog, S. L. D., Jimmieson, N. L., & Irmer, B. E. (2013). Haunted by the past: Effects of poor change management history on employee attitudes and turnover. *Group Organization Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601110392990>.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 595-616. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.004>
- Bryson, A., Barth, E., & Dale-Olsen, H. (2013). The effects of organizational change on worker well-being and the moderating role of trade unions. *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*, 66(4), 989-1011. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001979391306600410>
- Burnett, M., & Pettijohn, C. (2015). Investigating the efficacy of mind-body therapies and emotional intelligence on worker stress in an organizational setting: an experimental approach. *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications & Conflict*, 19(1), 146-158. <http://www.alliedacademies.org/journal-of-organizational-culture-communications-and-conflict/>.



- Call, L., Nyberg, J., Ployhart, E., & Weekley, J. (2015). The dynamic nature of collective turnover and unit performance: the impact of time, quality, and replacements. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58, 1208-1232. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0669>
- Core, A. (2014). *Change your day, not your life: A realistic guide to sustained motivation, more productivity, and the art of working well*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Dechawatanapaisal, D. (2023). The effects of employee engagement, organizational support, and leadership on employee retention intentions. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 45(4), 895-913. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-09-2022-0418>
- Deloitte. (2024). Workplace well-being and burnout survey. Deloitte Insights. <https://www.deloitte.com>
- Dirks, K. T., & Ferrin, D. L. (2002). Trust in leadership: Meta-analytic findings and implications for research and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), 611-628. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.611>
- Dubey, R., Roubaud, D., Gunasekaran, A., Childe, S. J., Papadopoulos, T., Hazen, B., & Giannakis, M. (2017). Examining the effect of external pressures and Organizational culture in shaping performance measurement systems (PMS) for sustainability benchmarking: Some empirical findings. *International Journal of Production Economics*, 19363-76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2017.06.029>
- Dutton, J. E., Workman, K. M., & Hardin, A. E. (2014). Compassion at work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1, 277-304. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091221>
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>
- Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111-132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.07.004>
- Florea, R., & Florea, R. (2016). Individual and organizational implications of work-related stress. *Economy Trans disciplinaryity Cognition*, 19(1), 28-33. https://www.ugb.ro/etc/etc2016no1/06_Florea_Ramona__Florea_Radu.PDF
- Gallup. (2024). State of the global workplace 2024 report. *Gallup Press*. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace>
- Garazi A., Molero, M., Mangin, J.P. (2015), The effects of authentic leadership on turnover intention. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 36 (8) 955 – 971 <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-03-2014-0056>
- Guha, S., & Chakrabarti, S. (2016). Differentials in attitude and employee turnover propensity: a study of information technology professionals. *Global Business & Management Research*, 8(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150916631086>



-
- Hanna, G. (2017). Leadership: the linchpin of effective institutional partnerships. *International Journal of Higher Education Management (IJHEM)*, 3, 60-73. <http://www.aaua.org/journals/journals.htm>
- Hale, D., Ployhart, R. E., & Shepherd, W. (2016). A two-phase longitudinal model of a turnover event: disruption, recovery rates, and moderators of collective performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59, 906-929. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0546>
- Inceoglu, I., Thomas, G., Chu, C., Plans, D., & Gerbasi, A. (2023). Leadership behavior and employee well-being: An integrated review and future research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34(2), 101698. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101698>
- Jones, M., Donaldson, T., Freeman, E., Harrison, S., Leana, R., Mahoney, T., & Pearce, L. (2016). Management theory and social welfare: contributions and challenges. *Academy Of Management Review*, 41(2), 216-228. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0012>
- Lockett, A., Currie, G., Finn, R., Martin, G., & Waring, J. (2014). The influence of social position on sensemaking about organizational change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57(4), 1102-1129. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0055>
- Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. (2006). Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society: A relational perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 66(1), 99-115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9047-z>
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-96. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rev/>
- McLeod, S. A. (2007). *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.htm>
- Mohammadipour A, V., Dehghani M. A., Hamedani M., & Shafiee, H. (2016). Studying the relationship between lack of job promotion and career plateau of staff: A case study in the well-being office of Kerman. *International Journal of Management, Accounting & Economics*, 3(1), 75-84. <http://www.ijmae.com>
- Montano, D., Reeske, A., Franke, F., & Hüffmeier, J. (2021). Leadership, followers' mental health, and job performance in organizations: A comprehensive meta-analysis. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 42(2), 229-249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2482>
- National Association of Landscape Professionals. (2024). Industry statistics and economic impact. <https://www.landscapeprofessionals.org>
- Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2020). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 30(2), 100703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2018.01.001>
- Nyberg, A., & Ployhart, R. (2013). Context-emergent turnover (CET) theory: a theory of collective turnover. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(1), 109-131. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0201>



- Parker, K. A. (2014). The workplace bully: the ultimate silencer. *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications & Conflict*, 18(1), 169-185.
- Pirson, M. (2023). *Humanistic leadership: Protecting dignity and promoting well-being*. Cambridge University Press.
- Qazi, T. F., Khalid, A., & Shafique, M. (2015). Contemplating employee retention through multidimensional assessment of turnover intentions. *Pakistan Journal of Commerce & Social Sciences*, 9(2), 598-613.
- Rosenblatt, V. (2012). Hierarchies, power inequalities, and organizational corruption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(2), 237-251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1204-y>
- Saleem, M., Tufail, M. W., Atta, A., & Asghar, S. (2015). Innovative workplace behavior, motivation level, and perceived stress among healthcare employees. *Pakistan Journal of Commerce & Social Sciences*, 9(2), 438-446.
- Scheers, L. v., & Botha, J. (2014). Analyzing the relationship between employee job satisfaction and motivation. *Journal of Business & Retail Management Research*, 9(1), 98-109. https://www.jbrmr.com/cdn/article_file/i-20_c-186.pdf
- Sindhu, S., & Sindhu, A. (2014). Study on attrition and retention for business development executives at a private sector bank, Pune. *Clear International Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*, 5(12), 5-14. <http://ijrcm.org.in>
- Soebbing, B. P., Wicker, P., & Weimar, D. (2015). The impact of leadership changes on expectations of organizational performance. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(5), 485-497. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2014-0089>
- Society for Human Resource Management. (2024). The cost of employee turnover and retention strategies. *SHRM*. <https://www.shrm.org>
- Sparks, W. L., & Repede, J. F. (2016). Human motivation and leadership: assessing the validity and reliability of the actualized leader profile. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 20 (3), 23-43. <https://www.abacademies.org/journals/academy-of-educational-leadership-journal-home.html>
- Stroman, J (2018). *Turnover: A case study of middle managers in the landscape industry*. ProQuest Dissertation Publishing.
- Tost, L., Gino, F., & Larrick, R. (2013). When power makes others speechless: the negative impact of leader power on team performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56, 1465-1486. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0180>
- West, M. A. (2022). *Compassionate leadership : sustaining wisdom, humanity and presence in health and social care (First edition.)*. The Swirling Leaf Press.



Worline, M. C., & Dutton, J. E. (2017). *Awakening compassion at work: The quiet power that elevates people and organizations*. Berrett-Koehler.

Wilcox, K., Stephen, A. T., Laran, J., & Zubcsek, P. P. (2016). How being busy can Increase motivation and reduce task completion time. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 110 (3), 371-384. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000045>

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA Sage.

© 2026 The Author(s)

Published by the Journal of Integrative Leadership Studies.

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.