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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Perceived leader concern, employee authentic self-expression, and self-concept-job fit

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Abstract

Bringing one's authentic self to work is important to employees' psychological well-being and performance. Although literature has examined how organizational factors influence authentic self-expression, it has largely overlooked the role of leaders. Drawing from leadership research, this study investigates the impact of perceived leader concern on authentic self-expression and its downstream effects on job attitudes. Findings provide empirical support for our predictions. Specifically, perceived leader concern is positively associated with authentic self-expression, which in turn relates positively to perceived self-concept-job fit. Regarding downstream outcomes, self-concept-job fit is positively related to organizational commitment and negatively to turnover intentions. Serial mediation analyses show that leader concern indirectly affects commitment and turnover intentions through authentic self-expression and self-concept-job fit. These findings highlight that leaders who show genuine concern foster open communication and authentic self-expression, enhancing alignment between identity and work, thereby strengthening commitment and reducing turnover. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: leadership theories; authenticity; turnover; job design; commitment; work-related attitudes/behaviors

> 'I found my safe space in my leader… When I disclosed to him that …, he responded in a kind and compassionate way that made me feel seen and supported. His affirming response as a leader gave me the courage to be more open with our human resources, and eventually, with other colleagues.'
>
> —Graci Harkema (2023)

Introduction

In contemporary workplaces, it is common for individuals to conceal or mask core aspects of their identity due to concerns over negative stereotyping and judgment from others. According to Deloitte's recent *Uncovering Culture* report, 60% of U.S. workers reported engaging in 'covering' behavior at work in the last 12 months, with detrimental effects on their well-being (Deloitte, 2024). The authenticity literature has shown that concealing one's authentic self is strongly associated with reduced well-being, lower work engagement, and diminished performance (Cha et al., 2019). Conversely, employees who bring their authentic selves to work experience higher engagement and job satisfaction, perform better, and are less likely to turnover (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013; Martinez, Sawyer,

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Thoroughgood, Ruggs & Smith, 2017). This line of research underscores the significance of authenticity in the workplace. Central to authenticity is the idea that each person has a 'true' inner self and desire to achieves self-fulfillment by expressing this inner self through external actions (Guignon, 2004). That said, authenticity requires alignment between one's internal experiences (e.g., feelings, values, perspectives) and external expressions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Roberts, 2013).

Despite the established importance of authenticity, research on the antecedents of authentic self-expression in the workplace remains limited. Prior studies have primarily focused on organizational-level factors (e.g., organizational culture and climate) that support authenticity (e.g., Cable et al., 2013; Reis, Trullen & Story, 2016). Although this research provides valuable insights, it overlooks the critical role of leaders, who, because of their close connection with employees, may exert a stronger influence on authentic self-expression. To extend this literature, this study investigates how perceived leader concern influences followers' authentic self-expression.

We investigate the impact of perceived leader concern on followers' authentic self-expression for two reasons. First, given the frequent interaction between leaders and followers in daily work, followers' perception of how their leaders treat them, particularly in terms of concern and respect, are critical for their well-being and organizational effectiveness (Gilbreath, 2004; Herttalampi, Wiese & Feldt, 2023). Second, relationship literature has established that relationship quality is largely based on individuals' beliefs about their partners' concern for each other. People who perceive their relationships as embodying aspects of concern such as mutual respect, willingness to listen, and responsiveness to each other's needs tend to feel more satisfied with and committed to those relationships (Lemay, Clark & Feeney, 2007). By integrating insights from leader–follower interactions and relationship literature, we propose that employees who perceive high levels of leader concern may feel safer expressing themselves authentically. This proposed relationship is reflected in the opening quotation. Furthermore, we explore how this authenticity influences key work-related perceptions and attitudes. Specifically, we examine affective organizational commitment and turnover intention as downstream outcomes of authentic self-expression, and we consider employee self-concept job fit as an intermediary psychological mechanism.

This research contributes to the current literature in several ways. First, we introduce a critical management-level predictor of employee authenticity, examining perceived leader concern as a potentially powerful driver of authentic self-expression. Additionally, we provide a comprehensive view of authenticity's effects by investigating the downstream effects of authentic self-expression on employees' affective organizational commitment and turnover intention. This approach offers a more holistic understanding of authenticity, encompassing both its origins and its effects on work-related outcomes.

Second, our study adds to the very limited leader concern literature by examining additional correlates and effects. Much remains to be learned about the consequences of leader concern, and no research has explored the relationships among leader concern, authentic expression, and self-concept job fit. Furthermore, no study has attempted to link all these constructs to follower attitudes (e.g., organizational commitment, turnover intentions). This study addresses those as-yet-unexplored topics by expanding the breadth of opportunities managers can consider when trying to reduce follower turnover. In addition, this study explores leader concern as a distinct construct. It introduces the concept of perceived leader concern, differentiating it as a specific subtype of supervisor support that signals rapport, responsiveness, and acceptance. Although previous research has explored general support, examining concern specifically may provide new insights into its unique effects on employees' workplace experiences and well-being.

Third, this study will provide more knowledge about self-concept job fit. So far it has been shown to be related to followers' perceptions that their work is meaningful as well as turnover intentions (Scroggins, 2008). This study tests an additional outcome – organizational commitment – but also tests variables that may influence this important employee perception: perceived leader concern and authentic self-expression. Our study investigates whether self-concept job fit and freedom for authentic self-expression in the workplace are potentially powerful components of job quality. A recent study

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found that self-concept job fit and authentic self-expression were stronger predictors of perceived job quality than coworker social support, work overload, job stress, pay, promotion opportunities, and opportunities to learn (Gilbreath, Radigan, Braun, Cooke & Scroggins, 2024). This study offers an additional test of those two factors' relations with important work attitudes. Additionally, most extant research on fit has used fit as an exogenous independent variable and examined the effects of good or poor fit. Scant research has focused on the antecedents of fit and how to create positive person-job fit perceptions. This study contributes to this line of research by examining the mediating effect of person-job fit in the form of self-concept job-fit on the relationship between self-expression and job attitudes.

Theoretical background

Before describing our study, it could be helpful to situate it within the literature on leader behavior and follower outcomes. The effects of leader behavior have been a focus of research for many years (e.g., Fleishman, 1953). One outgrowth of this research was investigating how a leader's behavior affects labor relations (Fleishman & Harris, 1962). Later this expanded to investigations of leaders' effects on follower well-being (Seltzer & Numerof, 1988). Since then, the effects of leader behavior have been well documented. Supervisor support has negative relations with employees' emotional exhaustion, depression, anxiety, somatic complaints (Constable & Russell, 1986; Hämmig, 2017; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988), levels of psychosocial stress (Dormann & Zapf, 1999; Luo, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1992), and systolic blood pressure during high stress periods (Karlin, Brondolo & Schwartz, 2003). Supervisor support also moderates the negative effects of job stress and perceived workload (Cummins, 1990; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988), as well as the relationship between employee self-efficacy and job performance (Ballantine & Nunns, 1998). In addition, supervisor support is related to employee perceptions of quality of work life (Rathi & Lee, 2017), idea implementation (Škerlavaj, Černe & Dysvik, 2014), engagement (Holland, Cooper & Sheehan, 2017), and employee well-being. As we explain in our literature review, we view leader concern as a subtype of supervisor support and leader behavior.

Perceived leader concern

Supervisors[1] and their employees are enmeshed in a relationship, and some employees spend just as many if not more of their waking hours on the job with their supervisor as they do with friends and family outside of work. Although the supervisor–subordinate relationship differs from these family relationships, it is likely that some of the characteristics of these relationships also characterize the supervisor–employee relationship.

While the effects of supervisor support have been well documented, insights could be gained by examining specific support factors and behaviors to determine their correlates and effects. More specific forms of supervisor support have received limited attention. The literature on personal relationships offers one avenue for better understanding the effects of subtypes of supervisor support. Within that literature, concern is regarded as a strong indicator of relationship health and as important for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Lemay et al., 2007; Reis, Clark & Holmes, 2004). This study focuses on one element of support, perceived leader concern (PLC). Investigating the effects of PLC enables us to adapt concern in personal relationships to the leader–follower relationship and test PLC's relations with important outcomes.

[1]For purposes of clarity, when describing the effects of leader behavior by an employee's immediate manager, we use the terms 'supervisor' and 'employee'. We also use 'supervisor' when a source we are drawing from used that term and when discussing the granular dyadic on-the-job interactions between managers and employees. We use 'leader' and 'follower' when addressing the broader aspects of leader behavior.

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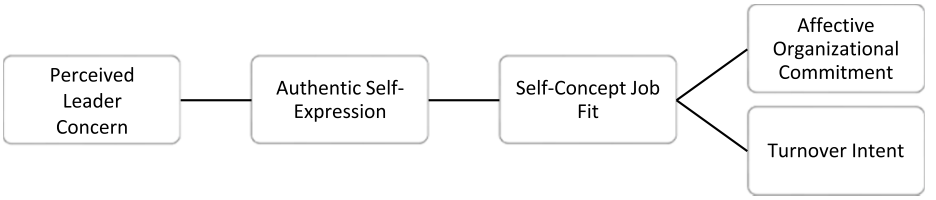


Figure 1. Theoretical research model.

Hypotheses development

Figure 1 indicates how PLC may relate to psychological constructs, attitudes, and behaviors. We hypothesize that PLC increases followers' ability to express themselves openly and reveal more about themselves. This in turn influences a follower's job fit in the form of fit between the job and followers' self-concept, which leads to a higher level of commitment to the organization and a lower desire to find a different job. Next, we discuss the relations depicted in the research model.

Perceived leader concern and authentic self-expression

Authentic self-expression is about sharing who we are with others. Although the effects of authentic self-expression at work have received limited empirical attention, there is theory and research that provides some insight into how PLC may influence followers' authentic self-expression. *Leader–member exchange* (LMX) theory describes how high-quality, trust-based relationships between leaders and followers foster a range of positive outcomes, including openness and authenticity. When followers perceive their leaders as genuinely concerned, they are more likely to feel valued and supported, which encourages them to express their authentic selves (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa, 2005). High-quality LMX relationships promote psychological safety and personal acceptance, enabling authenticity in followers (Hinojosa, McCauley, Randolph-Seng & Gardner, 2014).

The work of Edmondson (1999) emphasizes that people are more likely to be authentic when they feel safe from judgment or retribution (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When leaders demonstrate genuine concern, they create a psychologically safe environment where followers feel secure enough to express their true selves without fear of negative consequences (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). A leader who respects followers and values them for who they are is likely to encourage followers to engage in authentic self-expression. Thus, PLC should promote a sense of psychological safety, allowing followers to 'open up' and share some of the hidden aspects of their thoughts, personality, interests, and life outside of the workplace.

In the context of the workplace, *attachment theory* posits that secure attachments to leaders – formed through trust, care, and emotional support – enable followers to feel secure in expressing their authentic selves (Hinojosa et al., 2014). When leaders show concern, followers are more likely to experience this secure attachment, fostering an environment where they feel comfortable and supported in being authentic.

Employees working in an organization that is tolerant of authentic self-expression have less need to act unnaturally or hide their feelings to fit in; they are freer to be themselves. When interactions between followers and their leader are friendly, open, and communicative, it can build trust. And it presumably requires trust that being open about one's emotions, opinions, and hidden aspects of one's self will be well-received. Leader behavior such as indicating to followers that being natural is acceptable can reduce the need for affectation and promote unbiased self-presentation (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014). We therefore expect that:

Hypothesis 1: PLC will be positively correlated with followers' authentic self-expression.

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Authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit

We believe a critical way a supervisor can have positive effects on an employee is by helping them achieve person-environment fit. Research has revealed the importance of multiple types of fit for work-related attitudes and behavior (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), and employees often desire work that validates their sense of self (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In other words, many employees are likely to thrive in jobs that fit who they perceive themselves to be. This is the issue of self-concept job fit. According to the construct's originator (Scroggins, 2008), self-concept job fit is when a job's content and tasks produce feelings that are congruent with one's self-perceptions. Self-concept job fit can also be described as the congruence of employees' self-perception with the nature of the work they perform (Scroggins, 2007; Scroggins & Benson, 2007). When self-concept job fit is high, the performance of job tasks verifies the individual's identity and self-concept.

How authentic self-expression affects self-concept job fit ventures into unexplored territory. However, there are theories that provide a basis for hypothesizing. *Self-verification theory* posits that self-verification (i.e., the confirmation of oneself) is an important goal of people in their everyday life (Swann, 1983). Self-verification theory suggests that individuals are motivated to maintain consistency between their self-concept and how they are perceived by others. When employees can express themselves authentically at work, it reinforces their self-concept, creating a greater sense of alignment (or fit) between their self-concept and their job. Self-affirming information is both valued and satisfying.

Theories of authenticity, such as that of Kernis and Goldman (2005), emphasize that individuals have an intrinsic need to express their true selves. This authentic self-expression helps people feel more connected to their roles, leading to better self-concept job fit as they experience congruence between their identity and their work roles. Authenticity allows for a genuine integration of self and role, enhancing the sense of fit (Leroy & Sels, 2008). Poor job fit can threaten the self-concept (Gottfredson, 2002), so it is important that individuals find a job that enables them to become who they want to be and someone they feel good about (Savickas, 2002). An individual is more likely to perceive a good job fit when they can express certain characteristics of the self in their work. Although we are unsure about the directionality of the relationship, we think that authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit will be related in many job settings. If an accepting leader leads followers to feel comfortable opening up and expressing more aspects of themselves, this could lead to feeling that they are a good fit for their job. In addition, authentically sharing more about one's interests, goals and needs could assist followers in working their way into positions within an organization that are a good fit for them. We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2: authentic self-expression will be positively correlated with self-concept job fit.

Self-concept job fit, turnover intention, and organizational commitment

In addition to person-environment fit theory, self-verification theory, and authenticity theory, several other theories lead one to expect that, as self-concept job fit increases, so will organizational commitment. *Self-consistency theory* suggests that individuals are motivated to act in ways consistent with their self-concept (Elliott, 1986). If an individual's job aligns with their self-concept, they are more likely to feel fulfilled and stay committed to the organization, as this alignment reduces cognitive dissonance and enhances self-esteem (Nolan & Harold, 2010). And *social identity theory* suggests that people derive a significant part of their self-concept from their social roles, including their job. When there is congruence between an individual's job and their identity, they are likely to have a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to the organization.

Several theories also suggest that self-concept job fit will affect turnover intentions. *The theory of work adjustment* (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) proposes that job satisfaction and retention are a function

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of alignment between employees' needs and job characteristics. When a job fits well with one's self-concept, employees are more likely to experience satisfaction, which in turn should reduce turnover intentions. *Self-determination theory* emphasizes that fulfillment of intrinsic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) enhances motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A job that aligns with an individual's self-concept likely meets these needs more fully, fostering intrinsic motivation to stay in the organization. When these needs are met, individuals are less inclined to consider leaving, as they feel more satisfied and authentic in their work. *Identity theory* suggests that when a role aligns with an individual's self-concept, the role becomes a meaningful part of their identity. The desire to avoid role discontinuity, or the disruption of an identity-affirming environment, makes turnover less attractive. If the job supports employees' self-concept, leaving would mean giving up a role that enhances their identity, thus lowering turnover intentions. And according to *affective events theory* (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), work events impact emotional reactions that, in turn, influence attitudes and behaviors. When a job aligns with an employee's self-concept, it is likely to create more positive work experiences and fewer negative ones. This emotional positivity strengthens organizational attachment, making the idea of leaving less appealing.

While research on self-concept job fit is limited, it has been found to be correlated with employees' perceptions that their work is meaningful as well as turnover intentions (Scroggins, 2008). Shamir (1991) proposed that meaningful work results from the fit between job tasks and an individual's self-concept. And meaningful work is associated with higher organizational commitment and lower turnover (Geldenhuys, Taba & Venter, 2014). Therefore, we predict that

Hypothesis 3: self-concept job fit will be positively correlated with organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 4: self-concept job fit will be negatively correlated with turnover intentions.

Mediation effects of authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit

Turning to the mediators in our model, starting with authentic self-expression, caring behavior by a leader is likely to encourage followers to express themselves more freely, causing them to feel less need to suppress their identity and emotions, thereby avoiding some of the draining effects of emotion regulation and surface acting. That freedom to act authentically in the workplace should promote job satisfaction. In a study of supervisors' effects on followers, Kim, Lin, and Kim (2019) found that employees who were able to express their naturally felt emotions rather than surface acting (i.e., faking) reported higher job satisfaction. Gilbreath (2004) found that the leader behavior of allowing followers to 'be themselves' without negative consequences was associated with lower job stress. Cable et al. (2013) found that authentic self-expression significantly predicted work engagement, job satisfaction, and job performance. Furthermore, relating to others authentically facilitates openness and truthfulness in relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2005), which can build trust (Nooteboom, 2003). Openness and trust among followers and leaders should contribute to a psychologically healthy work environment. Those processes contributing to job satisfaction and psychological well-being could be expected to result in higher organizational commitment and less turnover.

Considering the second potential mediator – self-concept job fit – we previously described how authentic self-expression could affect followers' self-concept job fit. If followers do not have to fake or suppress who they are on the job, that eliminates one source of poor fit between one's job and one's ideal self. And if followers express more of their work-related needs and how their ideal self overlaps with their occupational goals, it could help them work their way into jobs that fit their self-concept.

We predict that the effect of PLC on organizational commitment and turnover intentions occurs partially through authentic self-expression leading to self-concept job fit. In addition to the mediated effect, a leader's concern for followers should also have a direct, unmediated effect on organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Thus, we hypothesize that

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Hypothesis 5: the relationship between PLC and follower commitment to the organization will be partially mediated by authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit in sequence.

Hypothesis 6: the relationship between PLC and follower turnover intentions will be partially mediated by authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit in sequence.

Methods

Sample and procedure

After obtaining the proper approvals from both our IRB and the participating organizations, data were collected using a questionnaire administered in six organizations in the state of Colorado in the United States. We solicited organizations in the region by mail and phone. We focused on those with at least 30 employees, whose top leadership was local, and ones where we could obtain permission to survey the entire workforce. Anonymized identifiers were created for each potential participant, who logged into dedicated laptops to complete the survey. While participants were not directly compensated, they were permitted additional time during meal or break periods to finish the survey. This process occasionally required multiple visits to the worksite to capture the maximum number of responses from all shifts and workgroups. While we originally designed the survey to be longitudinal, only one organization was able to complete a second survey round due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which ended our efforts to recruit additional organizations. Our final survey design was cross-sectional, and the responses were collected between 2017 and 2019. The sample included six organizations from a diverse set of industries: three in manufacturing, one in vocational rehabilitation services, one in cannabis retailing, and one in county government. Across these six organizations, there were 411 potential participants; 376 consented to participate, and 345 completed all questions, yielding a response rate of 91.4% and a completion rate of 83.9%.

The final sample ($N = 345$)[2] was 48% female. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was White (58%), Hispanic or Latino (33%), Black or African American (1.7%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1.3%), Asian (.8%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (.5%), and other (4.7%). The mean age of participants was 38.5 ($SD = 14.3$), average number of years of work experience, 14.9 ($SD = 13.2$), and participant's mean tenure in their current position, 3.1 years ($SD = 5.6$).

Measures

Perceived leader concern

Our measure of PLC is derived from the scale developed by (Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick & Finkel, 2011). We changed 'my partner' to 'my supervisor' when adapting the scale. Our scale measures elements of concern related to an individual's identity, emotions, and need by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which 18 items are descriptive of their supervisor. Some of the items in the measure relate to the existing organizational behavior literature: [My supervisor] 'knows me well' and 'sees the same virtues and faults in me as I see in myself' (self-verification perception; Kim et al., 2019); 'is aware of what I am thinking and feeling' (leader empathy; Fleishman & Salter, 1963; Scott, Colquitt, Paddock & Judge, 2010); and 'esteems me, shortcomings and all' (organization-based self-esteem; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings & Dunham, 1989). Other items are less connected to organizational behavior research and constructs: [My supervisor] 'values and respects the whole package that is the "real" me"; 'seems to focus on the "best side" of me,' and 'expresses liking and encouragement for me.' Those and other scale items measure understanding and validation from a leader.

[2]The final sample of 345 participants meets commonly recommended thresholds for sample adequacy in structural equation modeling (e.g., Kline, 2012) and is comparable to or larger than sample sizes used in similar studies in the management literature (e.g., Gale et al., 2024). This sample size also provides sufficient power to detect small-to-medium effect sizes (Cohen, 1992).

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Other items from the scale include [My supervisor usually] 'really listens to me,' 'seems interested in what I am thinking and feeling,' 'is responsive to my needs,' and 'values my abilities and opinions.' The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*completely true*). The α for this scale was .98.

Authentic self-expression

Authentic self-expression at work was measured using five items (α = .90) from the Eudaimonic Well-Being Questionnaire Scale (Waterman, 1993, 2005). Example items include 'in this job, I can express myself' and 'in this job, I can be who I really am,' with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Self-concept job fit

Four items (α = .75) from Scroggins' (2003) scale were used to measure self-concept job fit: 'I cannot see myself in any other type of job different from the one I am currently performing'; 'the performance of my job tasks makes me realize that I have several good qualities'; 'the performance of my job tasks makes me feel satisfied with myself'; and 'the performance of my job tasks makes me feel good about who I am.' Response choices ranged from 1 (*very little*) and 5 (*very much*).

Affective organizational commitment

Four items (α = .84) from the Allen and Meyer (1990) Affective Commitment Scale were used to measure employees' emotional attachment to and identification with their employer/organization. The items were 'I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization (R)', 'I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to my organization'(R), 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization', and 'this organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me'. Response choices ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Turnover intentions

Three items (α = .85) from Colarelli (1984) were used to measure turnover intentions: 'I frequently think of leaving my job at this organization' and 'if I have my own way, I will not be working for this organization one year from now'. Response choices ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Control variables

We included four control variables in our analyses. The first is a simple identification variable (group) we utilized to separate the cannabis organization from the others. To date, there is little-to-no job quality research on the cannabis industry, and we wanted to be able to isolate any effects that may be unique to that industry. We also included three demographic controls (gender, race, and age) to account for potential confounding effects in the absence of direct data on income. Although our original intent was to include a measure of individual income, only two of the organizations we surveyed would allow us to collect this information. Given this limitation, we adopted theoretically grounded proxies that have been consistently linked to income levels in prior research. Specifically, demographic variables such as race, gender, and age are frequently associated with income disparities and socioeconomic status across populations. Their inclusion allows us to statistically test for these influences when analyzing other relationships in our data, thereby improving the internal validity of our findings. Importantly, our decision aligns with Bernerth and Aguinis's (2016) call for control variables to be theoretically justified and transparently reported.

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Analyses and results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Before testing the model shown in Fig. 1, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using Mplus 8.3 to examine the measurement model with all study variables (i.e., PLC, authentic self-expression, self-concept job fit, affective commitment to the organization, and turnover intentions). The hypothesized 5-factor model fits the data adequately (χ^2 (550) = 1117.17, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.05). Moreover, the model fit was significantly better than alternative models, including a 4-factor model in which items for authentic self-expression and self-concept-job fit loaded onto the same latent variable (χ^2 (554) = 1368.37, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06; $\Delta\ \chi 2$ (4) = 251.20, $P < 0.001$), a three-factor model in which items for perceived leader rapport, authentic self-expression, and self-concept-job fit loaded onto the same latent variable (χ^2 (557) = 2459.13, CFI = 0.79, TLI = 0.78, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.13; $\Delta\ \chi 2$ (7) = 1341.96, $P < 0.001$), and the one-factor model where all items loaded onto the same latent variable (χ^2 (560) = 3269.60, CFI = 0.70, TLI = 0.68, RMSEA = 0.11, SRMR = 0.15; $\Delta\ \chi 2$ (10) = 2152.43, $P < 0.001$). Overall, this supports the factor structure of our hypothesized five-factor model.

Since our data comes from the cannabis and non-cannabis industries, we ran analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to test the difference between the two subgroups. The results reveal that the two groups have no substantial difference in gender and race, but they are significantly different in age ($F(1, 393) = 131.54$, $P < 0.001$) and the key variables in the model including PLC ($F(1, 387) = 21.94$, $P < 0.001$), authentic self-expression ($F(1, 386) = 56.75$, $P < 0.001$), self-concept job fit ($F(1, 383) = 54.58$, $P < 0.001$), affective commitment to the organization ($F(1, 377) = 17.67$, $P < 0.001$), and turnover intention ($F(1, 376) = 20.37$, $P < 0.001$). Therefore, we tested the model with four control variables (i.e., cannabis or non-cannabis, age, race, and gender) and found that the significant relationships still hold.

Tests of hypotheses

We conducted our analyses using SPSS (version 27) and Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). We first assessed the distribution of all key variables by examining skewness and kurtosis values in SPSS. All values were within ± 2, indicating approximate normality (Byrne, 2010). Accordingly, we conducted a path analysis applying maximum likelihood (ML) estimation for our hypothesis analyses. To examine the indirect effects, we employed bootstrap analyses based on 5000 resamples to calculate 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Table 2 presents the path coefficients testing the hypothesized model.

PLC was positively correlated with followers' organizational commitment ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, $P < 0.001$) and negatively correlated with followers' turnover intention ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.03$, $P < 0.001$). PLC was positively associated with employees' authentic self-expression ($b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.03$, $P < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. We predicted (H2) that authentic self-expression will be positively correlated with self-concept-job fit, which was confirmed ($b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.05$, $P < 0.001$). Interestingly, PLC was not directly correlated with self-concept job fit, but the predictions that self-concept job fit will be positively correlated with organizational commitment (H3: $b = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, $P < 0.001$) and negatively correlated with turnover intentions (H4: $b = -0.45$, $SE = 0.07$, $P < 0.001$) were supported.

The results of mediation analysis indicated that the effect of PLC on employee affective commitment was partially mediated by authentic self-expression and self-concept-job fit (indirect effect = 0.03, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [.02, .05], the confidence interval does not include zero), supporting Hypothesis 5. Moreover, Hypothesis 6 was also supported. Specifically, authentic self-expression and self-concept-job fit partially mediated the effect of PLC on employee turnover intentions (indirect effect = −0.03, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−.05, − .02]).

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Group	0.69	0.46	—								
2. Gender	1.53	0.50	−0.09	—							
3. Race	5.23	1.19	0.06	0.03	—						
4. Age	39.73	13.92	0.50**	−0.08	0.10	—					
5. Perceived leaderconcern	4.35	2.11	0.23**	0.09	0.07	0.16**	(0.98)				
6. Authentic self-expression	2.34	1.22	0.36**	0.04	0.05	0.14**	0.36**	(0.90)			
7. Self-conceptjob fit	2.40	0.98	0.35**	0.15**	−0.03	0.08	0.25**	0.56**	(0.75)		
8. Affective commitment to the organization	3.12	1.16	0.21**	0.16**	0.00	0.01	0.41**	0.49**	0.58**	(0.84)	
9. Turnover intentions	4.79	1.21	−0.23**	−0.06	0.01	−0.05	−0.40**	−0.50**	−0.53**	−0.73**	(0.85)

Notes: *N* ranges from 363 to 410 due to missing data (pairwise deletion). * $P < 0.05$. ** $P < 0.01$ (Two-tailed).
Group: non-cannabis industry was coded as 1 and cannabis industry as 0; Gender: female was coded as 1 and male as 2; Race: American/Alaskan Native was coded as 1, Asian as 2, Black as 3, Hispanic/Latino as 4, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Island as 5, white as 6, and others as 7. The Cronbach alpha estimates of the included variables are presented in the bracket along the diagonal line of the table.

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Table 2. Results of path analyses

	Dependent variables											
	Authentic self-expression			Self-concept job fit			Affective commitment to the organization			Turnover intentions		
Variables	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*	*b*	*S.E.*	*T*	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*
Constant	1.13**	.38	2.93	1.07**	.26	4.16	1.12**	.31	3.62	6.43**	.32	19.81
Group	.89**	.15	5.92	.53**	.13	4.18	−.06	.13	−.44	.09	.13	.72
Gender	.09	.12	.75	.35**	.09	4.05	.09	.10	.87	.16	.10	1.57
Race	.01	.05	.21	−.06	.04	−1.51	−.01	.04	−.18	.01	.04	.27
Age	−.01	.01	−1.52	−.01	.00	−1.27	−.01	.00	−1.85	.01	.01	1.28
Perceived leader concern	.16**	.03	4.98	.01	.02	.52	.13**	.03	4.85	−.14**	.03	−4.27
Authentic self-expression				.38**	.05	7.39	.17**	.06	2.98	−.23**	.06	−4.10
Self-concept-job fit							.51**	.06	8.18	−.45**	.07	−6.69
R^2	.21**			.38**			.45**			.41**		
							Estimates	*SE*		LLCI	ULCI	
Indirect effects												
X → M1 → M2 → Y1							.03**	.01		.02	.05	
X → M1 → M2 → Y2							−.03**	.01		−.05	−.02	

Note: $n = 345$. LLCI and ULCI range for variable coefficients based on 95% confidence interval. * $P < 0.05$. ** $P < 0.01$.
X = Perceived leader concern; M1 = Authentic self-expression; M2 = Self-concept-job fit; Y1 = Affective commitment to the organization; Y2 = Turnover intentions.

In addition, given that our data were collected from six different organizations,[3] there is a possibility that our findings may be confounded by organizational characteristics. To test this possibility, we conducted a supplementary analysis. First, we conducted Levene's tests for homogeneity of variance to assess whether there was significant variance in key study variables across the six participating organizations. Results indicated that variances were equivalent across companies for perceived leader concern [$F(5, 383) = 2.20$, $P = .054$], authentic self-expression [$F(5, 381) = 1.93$, $P = 0.089$], self-concept–job fit [$F(5, 378) = 1.43$, $P = 0.213$], and affective organizational commitment [$F(5, 372) = 1.99$, $P = 0.079$]. However, the test revealed a significant difference in variance for turnover intention [$F(5, 371) = 3.18$, $P = 0.008$], indicating a violation of homogeneity for this variable. To address this, we conducted a supplementary analysis by including five dummy variables representing the six organizations as controls. The results remained consistent with our main findings, suggesting that organizational differences did not confound the hypothesized relationships. Full results of the adjusted analysis are presented in Appendix A.

Discussion

We investigated how applicable the research findings on personal relationships might be to the leader–follower relationship. Learning how to make that relationship rewarding for both parties has implications for followers' job satisfaction, well-being, and quality of life. We found that PLC is directly linked to followers' authentic self-expression, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Self-concept job fit is strongly linked to organizational commitment and turnover intent, and it is also related to authentic self-expression. Therefore, the link between PLC and an employee's decision to stay with an organization is partially mediated by an employees' ability to express themselves openly and whether an employee experiences their job as a good fit for them. Next, we discuss the study's theoretical implications, research implications, practical implications, and limitations.

Theoretical implications

Leadership theory has been informed and sometimes dominated by various theories and research streams. Perhaps not a theory, per se, but the research on consideration and initiation of structure (Fleishman, 1953) yielded helpful insights (Judge, Piccolo & Ilies, 2004). It showed that leaders who focus on tasks and neglect treating employees considerately have negative effects on their employees (Seltzer & Numerof, 1988). We believe those earlier researchers would understand and support our findings that PLC, clearly a considerate behavior, is related to how employees feel about their job.

This study enhances leadership theory by introducing PLC as a distinct construct within supportive leadership. Although supportive behaviors have been widely researched, this study delves into specific, concern-based actions (e.g., understanding followers and validating them), that seem to be important for fostering positive follower outcomes. This focus adds depth to leadership theory, particularly within LMX and transformational leadership frameworks, by specifying how care-oriented leadership behaviors influence follower attitudes and behaviors. LMX theory posits that high-quality exchanges expand the 'in-group' of followers who exhibit more effort and greater loyalty to the organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou & Yammarino, 2001). Specifically, we find that leaders who cultivate concern have followers who are less likely to leave. This appears to be the case in our study as those employees who have supervisors who are attentive, respectful, and allow them to express themselves openly reported having a higher self-concept job fit and were less interested in finding a new job. This illuminates some of the inner workings of high-quality exchanges as elucidated by LMX theory.

[3]To assess potential non-independence due to organizational clustering, we calculated ICC1, ICC2, and Rwg for all key variables. ICC1 values ranged from 0.06 to 0.16, all below the commonly recommended threshold of 0.20 for multilevel modeling (Bliese, 2000), suggesting limited between-organization variance. Therefore, we did not conduct multilevel analysis. Full results are reported in Appendix B.

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Additionally, research has shown the positive effects of transformational leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Díaz-Sáenz, 2011). One of its components, individualized consideration, encompasses the provision of support. Our findings highlight concern as one form of support that may be particularly helpful. Research has also shown the pernicious effects of laissez-faire leadership (Mathieu & Gilbreath, 2025). Laissez-faire leadership includes behaviors such as avoiding getting involved when important issues arise, being absent when needed, and delaying responding to urgent questions. Those behaviors are indicative of low concern for followers.

One of the main theoretical contributions of our study is that it suggests that the self plays an important role in whether employees are committed and want to continue working for their employer. Both of our mediator variables, authentic self-expression and self-concept job fit, are self-based. The workplace is an important setting in which people can test and refine their self-concept. Allowing employees to express their true self and explore jobs until they find one that fits their self-concept seems to offer robust ways to do so.

Research implications

Supervisor support is well-established as a contributor to a positive work experience for employees. It may be time to carve out different types of support to establish which are the most efficacious under various circumstances. Options include emotional support, tangible or instrumental support, informational support and – now – concern manifested by being empathetic, responsive, and a good listener.

Our study and those of others indicate that opportunity for authentic self-expression is not simply an esoteric academic construct with marginal applicability in the work world. Studies continue to suggest that it can have important effects on employees and that it may be an important indicator of job quality (Gilbreath et al., 2024). Maybe other researchers can find ideas from this study for further exploration. For example, there may be another subset of leader behavior – authenticity-encouraging behaviors – that exerts a stronger influence on whether employees act authentically a work.

And last, self-concept job fit is a construct that has been mostly ignored in the management and organizational behavior field. This study and that of others (Gilbreath et al., 2024; Scroggins, 2007) suggest that it can be a powerful influence on how people feel about their job. Researchers may want to test its explanatory effects alongside other types of fit such as person-job and person-organization fit.

Practical implications

Caution must be exercised in making recommendation based on this exploratory study, but it seems that employers will be able to improve employees' views of their job by allowing them to express their true self while on the job (Gilbreath, 2004; Judge, Erez & Bono, 1998). Given the known physical and emotional toll that surface and deep acting can extract from employees (e.g., Brotherridge and Grandey, 2002; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kim et al., 2019), it would not be surprising that jobs in which employees can express their true selves are engaging and affirming. Supervisors promoting a psychologically safe and inclusive environment and appropriate self-disclosure (Kahn, 1990) would empower employees to be themselves. Doing so would allow employees to feel comfortable being themselves appropriately while at work, fostering feelings of having a good job.

We believe supervisors can potentially have a substantial influence on the degree to which employees achieve self-concept job fit by allowing employees to express their authentic selves at work. Matching job candidates and new hires with a position that fits who they see themselves as is a good first step. Granting autonomy and making astute task assignments will be helpful, too. We acknowledge that a job generally comes with a defined role and set of tasks. However, there is some variation in the way those tasks can be performed. If given some job control, employees can perform their tasks in ways that befits them. Furthermore, we have observed adept supervisors assign tasks based on the

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task's fit with employees' needs. In other words, supervisors often have latitude to assign a given task to a variety of employees, and some of them do that based on not only their employees' skills but also based on employees' needs and drives. Once a supervisor comes to understand an employee, the supervisor can flex the job's content in the direction of the employee's needs and skills.

Relatedly, supervisors can empower employees to increase self-concept job fit through methods such as job crafting and idiosyncratic deals. By negotiating idiosyncratic deals with supervisors (Rousseau, 2005), employees can craft their own job to some extent by shaping it to fit their personality and self-concept. For example, an employee whose self-image is that of a helping or nurturing individual might be allowed to craft their job in such a way to include training and mentoring tasks. By making training and mentoring a part of this individual's job, they can perform work consistent with their self-concept, affirming the individual's sense of self. Thus, flexing or redesigning a position to fit an employee's self-concept so that they are inclined to stay in that job is something a responsive supervisor seems both likely to do and wise to do.

There are several other ways to achieve self-concept job fit. One is during the hiring process. During an interview, a discerning supervisor may perceive aspects of applicants' previous jobs that made them feel good or not good about performing that work. In a sense, without realizing it, they may be picking up on indicators of the extent to which an applicant's self-concept is a fit for the organization's job opening. Another is for job seekers to spend time learning about themselves, defining their ideal self and their job preferences. Time spent identifying their motivated skills, career anchors and drivers, and life purposes would help. The more job seekers know about who they are, who they want to be, and what they need from a job, the better it will be for both themselves and their employers. The higher degree of person-job fit resulting from that self-insight and self-concept clarity will increase the likelihood that the employee will be able to experience positive work outcomes.

Lastly, organizations should consider incorporating leader concern into leadership development programs. Training leaders to be more attuned to employees' emotional and esteem needs could lead to improved job satisfaction and decreased turnover, resulting in a more stable and engaged workforce.

Limitations

Our study has three clear limitations that provide opportunities for future researchers to explore. First, given that all variables were rated utilizing the same instrument over a 2-year period, the potential CMV bias should not be ignored. To minimize the potential CMV bias, following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012) as procedural remedies, we minimized the scale properties shared by measures by differentiating the measured contents and used scales. Specifically, we used 'my supervisor' as the reference point to measure perceived leader concern on a scale assessing truth ranging from 1 = '*Not at all true*' to 9 = '*Completely true*.' To assess self-concept job fit, we used 'the performance of my job tasks' as the reference point on a scale measuring strength, from 1 = '*Very little*' to 7 = '*Very much*'. For authentic self-expression, organizational commitment, and turnover intention, we used the self as reference point to measure on a scale indicating degree of agreement from 1 = '*Strongly disagree*' to 7 = '*Strongly agree*.' In addition, following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003), we conducted Harman's single factor analysis, which is one of the most popular methods for checking any substantial common variance coming from an unmeasured factor or source (Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc & Babin, 2016). Results show that the first factor accounted for 46.24% of the variance among variables, thereby indicating that the CMV bias may not be serious (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, future research should validate our findings by using time-lagged and muti-source research design.

Second, while we were able to collect information from some of the organizations regarding tangible rewards such as pay, benefits, and time off, not all the organizations in our sample would allow us to ask these questions. That prevented us from making some useful connections between our findings and some of the other critical aspects of turnover, but we were able to mitigate this somewhat

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by surveying several organizations who compete for the same employees. While this does not hold those variables constant, it does highlight some of the variance in PLC between those organizations.

Third and finally, we surveyed one organization that was exceptionally well-managed. While this was a good opportunity to observe such an operation in the field, it was so well-managed and had such an enthusiastic workforce that it threatened to skew our data. We were able to mitigate this by controlling for this organization (see Table 1 footnote), but in doing so, it may have dampened some of the effect sizes reported in Table 2. This is an uncommon problem, but one that researchers should be aware of if they encounter such an organization in the future.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationships between PLC and employee commitment and turnover intentions. Our results suggest that PLC potentially plays a pivotal role in shaping employee attitudes, particularly in relation to organizational commitment and turnover intentions. A concerned leader can help followers feel seen, heard, and valued, which in turn may foster authentic self-expression and better alignment between followers' self-concept and their job. Our results suggest that those mechanisms lead to higher levels of organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions. That clarifies some of the processes at work in the relationship between leaders and followers, indicating the importance of showing that they genuinely care for their followers. Our findings highlight the importance of perceptions of leaders' concern for followers as a means of enhancing person-job fit and reducing employee attrition, offering valuable insights for organizations seeking to retain talent in today's competitive labor market.

Competing interests. The authors declare no competing interests.

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Appendix A. Results of path analyses with controls of company

	Dependent variables											
	Authentic self-expression			Self-concept job fit			Affective commitment to the organization			Turnover intentions		
Variables	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*	*b*	*S.E.*	*T*	*b*	*S.E.*	*t*
Constant [a]	.59	.36	1.64	1.21**	.31	3.97	.76*	.30	2.52	5.57**	.36	15.42
Group	.50	.85	.04	.39**	.10	3.81	−.05	.33	−.16	.06	.43	.15
Gender	.16	.14	1.17	.29**	.10	2.76	.07	.11	.66	.14	.12	1.16
Race	.02	.05	.46	−.07	.04	−1.73	.03	.04	.81	.00	.04	.01
Age	.00	.01	−.36	−.01	.01	−1.02	−.01	.01	−1.62	.01	.01	.93
Perceived leader concern	.19**	.03	5.98	.03	.03	1.22	.17**	.03	6.00	−.17**	.04	−4.69
Authentic self-expression				.34**	.06	5.88	.15*	.07	2.16	−.19**	.06	−3.06
Self-concept-job fit							.51**	.07	7.33	−.45**	.08	−5.63
R^2	.25**			.38**			.47**			.41**		
							Estimates	*SE*		LLCI	ULCI	
Indirect effects												
X → M1 → M2 → Y1							.03**	.01		.02	.05	
X → M1 → M2 → Y2							−.03**	.01		−.05	−02	

Note: $n = 345$. LLCI and ULCI range for variable coefficients based on 95% confidence interval. * $P < 0.05$. ** $P < 0.01$.

[a] In this path analysis, we control the effect of organization on dependent variables by generating five dummy variables, but did not report in tables for brevity. X = Perceived leader concern; M1 = Authentic self-expression; M2 = Self-concept-job fit; Y1 = Affective commitment to the organization; Y2 = Turnover intentions.

Appendix B. Values of Rwg, ICCI, and ICC2 for key variables

Variables	R_{wg}	ICC1	ICC2
Perceived leader concerns	0.11	0.08	0.85
Authentic self-expression	0.62	0.15	0.92
Self-concept job fit	0.80	0.16	0.92
Organizational commitment	0.71	0.06	0.81
Turnover intention	0.64	0.07	0.81

Note: *Rwg* indicates within-group agreement; higher values reflect greater consensus. *ICC1* shows the proportion of variance due to group membership. *ICC2* reflects the reliability of group-level means.

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