Exploring the Factors Influencing Executive Attrition in Nonprofit Organizations

Hilda EKE

Marymount University, USA, hee89854@marymount.edu
0009-0006-2021-178X

Abstract: Nonprofit organizations play a critical role in addressing societal challenges, yet they face a persistent leadership crisis due to executive attrition. Over 50% of nonprofit executives in 2023 reported burnout severe enough to consider leaving their roles, posing significant risks to organizational stability and mission fulfillment. While previous research has extensively examined organizational and structural contributors to executive turnover, the personal factors influencing early departures remain underexplored. This research aims to illuminate the complexities surrounding executive attrition, including financial constraints, emotional labor, and staffing challenges unique to the nonprofit sector. The findings will provide a deeper understanding of how individual experiences shape executive departures, highlighting the impact of leadership vacuums on institutional knowledge retention, stakeholder relationships, and program continuity. Given that 70% of organizational initiatives fail during transition, addressing this issue is imperative for long-term sustainability. This research contributes to the existing literature by bridging a critical knowledge gap and offering insights into tailored retention strategies that account for the specific needs and challenges of nonprofit executives. The study's implications extend to nonprofit governance, talent management, and leadership development, ensuring that executive transitions do not compromise the sector's ability to meet pressing community needs.

Keywords: Nonprofit Organizations, Executive Attrition, Leadership Turnover, Executive Retention Strategies, Leadership Succession, Nonprofit Leadership Challenges, Burnout and Leadership Exits

JEL Codes: L31, J63, M12, M54, Z18

Introduction

Nonprofit organizations are vital to addressing societal challenges, yet they face a growing leadership crisis. In 2023 alone, over 50% of nonprofit executives reported experiencing burnout severe enough to consider leaving their roles (National Council of Nonprofits, 2023), threatening the sustainability of countless initiatives or the ability to fulfill their mission (Muscat, 2024). These organizations often operating with limited resources and under pressures, rely heavily on the dedication and expertise of their executive leadership (Domiter & Marciszewska, 2018) whose role is crucial to ensuring organizational success (Salamon, 2012; Santora & Sarros, 1996; Shier & Handy, 2020). When these leaders leave, the consequences can be devastating (Dilg, 2024), disrupting operations and jeopardizing long-term organizational sustainability (Stewart, 2016; Kaplan, 2001; Newman, 2024; Santora et al., 2015; Tebbe et al., 2017). Retaining effective leadership becomes paramount as nonprofits face increasing pressures to address growing community needs (Newman, 2024; Masoud & Basahal, 2023).

Existing studies on executive attrition identified factors that contribute to executive attrition, including organizational, process-related, and personal factors (Wanza, 2024; Stewart, 2016; Kaplan, 2001; Cummings & Worley, 2009; Shields, 1999). However, despite significant focus on organizational and process-related factors, there remains limited research exploring the personal drivers of executive attrition from the perspectives of executives themselves (Andrus et al., 2019; Bisht & Singh, 2012; Stewart, 2016).

Executive attrition, or the loss of senior leaders, presents a threat to nonprofit organizations. This loss creates leadership vacuums, jeopardizing mission fulfilment, operational stability and organizational success (Johnson, 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Masoud & Basahal, 2023; Stewart, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). The impact is particularly concerning because executive leadership is directly tied to accomplishing organizational goals (Foote, 2022; Froelich et al., 2011; Salamon, 2012; Stewart, 2016). Effective leadership is at the heart of every successful business transformation as evidenced by a 2022 McKinsey study that reports that 70% of organizational initiatives fail during transition (Dohadwala, 2024). Executive turnover can lead to negative consequences. Stewart and Diebold (2017) suggest that executive turnover can lead to poor organizational outcomes, including the loss of institutional knowledge (Dilg, 2024). This knowledge is critical for leveraging past experiences, and maintaining relationships with stakeholders and donors (Larrobino, (2006). Executives have a lot of information that is not always documented, including insights into organizational culture, stakeholders' relationships, and strategic plans that the organization risks losing when executives leave abruptly. Furthermore, operational effectiveness is compromised, leading to disruptions in fundraising, program continuity, and decline in staff morale and performance (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000; Dilg, 2024; Watrous et al., 2006). The extensive hiring and onboarding processes (Brown, 2021; Cornelius et al., 2011) which can take up to 12 months for new executives to be fully integrated into the team, further exacerbates the challenges posed by executive attrition. These prolonged timelines can cause delay in decision making and strategic initiatives (Cornelius et al., 2011; Gill, 2015; Santora et al., 2015).

The unique challenges faced by non-profit executives themselves further complicate issues. Unlike their for-profit counterpart, who are buffered by robust succession plans and financial incentives (Lewis & Roberts, 2018), nonprofit organizations often lack the resources for seamless executive transitions (Carter, 2016; Petrescu, 2012). This disparity, coupled with the multi-faceted roles nonprofit executives play, from managing limited resources to providing strategic oversight (Newman, 2024) makes replacing them more challenging. Moreover, existing leadership theories, traditionally derived from the for-profit sector in formulating and generalizing leadership theories, often fail to account for the unique challenges including financial constraints, emotional labor, and staffing challenges, faced by nonprofit executives themselves (Allison, 2002; Fernandez, 2008) that often characterize non-profit organization (Le et al., 2022). This gap further complicates the effort to effectively address executive attrition.

Despite operating with restricted funding, tight budgets, and limited investment in leadership development (Smith & Tulles, 2020; Zhai et al., 2017), nonprofit executives play a pivotal role in nonprofit organizations contributing to social, educational, and charitable needs in communities by providing services that might otherwise not exist (Tschirhart & Bieefeld, 2012). Their economic contribution is substantial, with the sector accounting for 12.8 million jobs in 2022 alone (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022) and representing 5.6% of the U.S. gross domestic product (Independent Sector, 2023). According to the Department of the Treasury (2023), there are over 1.3 million non-profit organizations in the United States, contributing $4.8 trillion in assets and generating $2.4 trillion in revenue. These data highlight the important role nonprofit organizations play in meeting critical community needs and contributing to national wealth (Kay, 2008). However, it contrasts with their for-

profit counterparts, who operate on a much larger scale in terms of asset size and revenue. For instance, Fortune 500 companies generated $16.1 trillion in revenue, with more than 35 trillion in assets in 2021 (N'gbala & Hilton, 2023), highlighting the resource disparities between the two sectors. This disparity in resources exacerbates operational disruptions, weakens stakeholder relationships, and jeopardizes long-term impact of non-profit organizations.

While existing literature acknowledges that executive attrition is influenced by organizational, personal, and process-related factors (Cummings & Worley, 2009; Kaplan, 2001; Shields, 1999; Stewart, 2016; Wanza, 2024), there is a gap in understanding the personal experiences of executives themselves. Although various studies have explored stakeholders' perspectives, the lived realities of executives remain underexplored highlighting the need for more targeted research to understand the personal experiences driving executive attrition (Bisht & Singh, 2012; Dush, 2017; Mehdi et al., 2012, 2012). This research aims to bridge this gap by adopting a narrative qualitative approach to explore the personal experiences of nonprofit executives who left their roles within three years of employment. Investigating these narratives will help provide valuable insight into the complexities of their decisions, identify the challenges they face, and uncover the strategies they employ to navigate the unique demands of the nonprofit sector.

Given the value of narrative qualitative research in understanding social phenomena, this study explores how individual experiences influence executive attrition within the first three years of employment in nonprofit organizations. Narrative qualitative research allows for deeper understanding of the stories and perspectives of nonprofit executives, offering valuable insights into the personal reasons why they depart from their roles (Wax, 2023). This approach recognizes that leadership experiences are not "one size fits all;" instead, individual experiences shape executive decision to leave their roles (Andrus et al., 2019). By capturing these narratives, the research aims to provide a multi-faceted perspective into the factors driving attrition, moving beyond generalized frameworks to understand the nuanced realities of nonprofit executives (Geib & Boenigk, 2024; Sulakatko, 2024). This understanding is crucial for developing tailored retention strategies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by nonprofit executives.

Problem Statement

Executive attrition remains a pressing challenge in nonprofit organizations (Stewart et al., 2021; Wanza, 2024), threatening organizational stability (Gibelman & Gelmen, 2002, p.66; Tebbe et al., 2017), eroding institutional knowledge, and compromising stakeholder relationships (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000; Larrobino, 2006; Stewart & Diebold, 2017; Wanza, 2024; Watrous et al., 2006). With projections showing that 60% to 75% of nonprofit executives plan to leave their organizations within the next five years (Geib & Boenigk, 2024; Bell et al., 2006), the sector continues to experience an ongoing shortage of executive leadership (DiNapoli, 2019; Landles-Cobb et al., 2015), a problem that can become worse over time (Tierney, 2006). The general business problem is that leadership shortages push the nonprofit sector toward a potential crisis. This leadership shortage is particularly concerning given that nonprofit organizations constitute the third-largest workforce in the U.S. and play a significant role in local economies (Salamon, 2018). While existing research has explored organizational and structural causes of executive attrition, the specific business problem is the limited insight into the personal factors driving early executive departures. This study addresses this gap by examining nonprofit, offering insights into the factors contributing to executive attrition.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the factors contributing to executive attrition in nonprofit organizations within the United States. The significance and originality of this inquiry lie in its exploration of an underexamined dimension of the factors that lead to nonprofit executive attrition. While existing literature has extensively addressed organizational and structural factors influencing leadership turnover, limited research has delved into the individual motivations and lived realities that drive executives to leave within their first three years of employment. Given that nonprofit organizations operate under resource constraints, leadership attrition presents an existential challenge, disrupting mission fulfillment, stakeholder relationships, and long-term sustainability. By employing a narrative qualitative methodology, this research aims to uncover the nuanced and deeply personal factors influencing executive attrition, thereby bridging a critical knowledge gap. This inquiry holds significant implications for organizational stability, talent management, and the broader sustainability of nonprofit institutions, ensuring that leadership transitions do not compromise their ability to address pressing societal challenges.

Method

This narrative literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on nonprofit executive attrition, with a particular focus on the factors that lead to departing executives within the first three years of employment. The review followed a systematic search strategy to identify relevant academic and gray literature across multiple databases and online repositories.

Databases and Sources

The literature search was conducted using the following databases and platforms to ensure a comprehensive and diverse collection of sources: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia, ProQuest, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), PubMed, JSTOR (for historical perspectives on nonprofit leadership), Scopus, Web of Science. These databases were selected to capture a broad spectrum of peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, dissertations, and gray literature relevant to nonprofit executive attrition.

Search Terms and Boolean Operators

A combination of search terms and Boolean operators was used to refine and expand the literature search. The primary search terms included:

- "Nonprofit executive attrition" OR "Nonprofit leadership turnover"
- "Executive burnout" AND "Nonprofit sector"
- "Leadership retention strategies" AND "Nonprofit organizations"
- "Nonprofit leadership crisis" OR "Executive departure in nonprofits"
- "Organizational sustainability" AND "Executive turnover"
- "Personal factors influencing executive attrition"
- "Qualitative narratives of nonprofit leaders"
- "Leadership succession planning" AND "Nonprofit challenges"

The Boolean operators **AND** and **OR** were used to refine searches, ensuring the retrieval of relevant studies addressing various dimensions of nonprofit executive attrition.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A structured approach was applied to determine the eligibility of studies for inclusion in this review:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies published between **1986 and 2024**, ensuring historical and contemporary perspectives on executive attrition.

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, doctoral dissertations, and gray literature (e.g., reports from nonprofit organizations, policy briefs).
- Studies focusing on nonprofit executive leadership turnover, burnout, and retention strategies.
- Research exploring the personal experiences and decision-making factors of nonprofit executives.
- Qualitative, narrative, and mixed-methods studies provide rich, descriptive insights into nonprofit leadership challenges.

Exclusion Criteria:
- Studies exclusively focusing on for-profit organizations or corporate executive turnover.
- Research unrelated to nonprofit executive attrition (e.g., leadership training, unrelated HR management practices).
- Articles without full-text access or lacking empirical evidence (e.g., opinion pieces, editorials).
- Studies focusing solely on organizational or process-related factors without addressing the personal experiences of executives.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Once relevant literature was identified, a structured data extraction process was implemented to ensure consistency and rigor. Key information was categorized into the following themes:

1. **Factors Contributing to Executive Attrition** (organizational, process-related, and personal factors).
2. **Personal Experiences of Nonprofit Executives** (emotional and psychological aspects, career decisions, job satisfaction, burnout).
3. **Implications for Executive Turnover** (impact on organizational sustainability, stakeholder relationships, operational effectiveness).
4. **Retention Strategies** (organizational interventions, leadership development, mentorship, succession planning).

A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify recurring patterns, gaps, and key findings across the literature. Data was coded and synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of nonprofit executive attrition through a narrative synthesis framework.

Review of the Literature

The pressures of maintaining a healthy work-life balance play a significant role in various quality-of-life conditions, which can influence executives' decisions to stay or leave their positions (Issa & Herma, 1986; Malik, 2023; Tomar & Singh, 2023). Moreover, stress and work-related pressure are significant factors that cause turnover (Mathew et al., 2024). Nonprofit executives face similar pressures (Singh, 2013) due to the demanding nature of their mission-driven roles, which often blur the lines between personal and professional life, leading to increased stress levels (LaRock, 2023). According to Clerkin et al. (2023), executives face the unique challenge of navigating complex roles and these multi-faceted roles (Singh et al., 2022) often come with long hours, emotional challenges, and the difficulty of managing work-life integration (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Szabo, 2010). Overtime, these stressors complicate their leadership journey (Alvarez, 2017; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; LaRock, 2023), prompting them to leave their roles (Rajpurohit, 2024).

In addition, nonprofit executives carry the emotional weight of addressing societal needs often driven by values such as altruism and social justice (Ash et al., 2024) while also serving as a bridge between the private and public sectors, adding more demands to their

roles (Pierce, 2022). These values can make nonprofit leadership role feel emotionally intense or carry a sense of personal responsibility to the organization's mission (Johnson, 2022). The emotional intensity and heightened sense of responsibility underscores the need to implement work policies that place value on executives' wellbeing. The work by Deery (2008) postulated work-life balance has a direct relation to an employee's decision to stay or leave the organization. Meanwhile, an effective work-life balance can significantly enhance employee health and productivity (Marecki, 2024). Research indicates that employees who successfully balance between work, family, and personal life tend to be happier, while those struggling with work-life balance often experience unhappiness (Marecki, 2024; Shammine, 2023). Previous literature on executive turnover in nonprofit organizations has employed various theoretical frameworks to understand the root causes and dynamics behind leadership transition (Stewart, 2016; Santora et al., 2009). One theory that offers a framework for understanding how people interpret the causes of events and behaviors, including their own and others' actions and experiences, is the Attribution Theory (Sanders, 2024). Initially proposed by Heider (1958), the theory suggests that people are motivated to identify the causes of events to better predict and control their environment (Manusov, 2017). Over the years, the attribution theory has been expanded by researchers like Weiner (1974), Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978), Kelley (1973), and Thomson and Martinko (2004), who introduced new dimensions for how people make sense of their experiences. Although Attribution theory has proven to be a robust theory, earlier studies faced criticism for inaccurately measuring the causal attrition. Russell's (1982) development of the causal dimension scale (CDS) made remarkable progress towards achieving precise measurement of causal dimension. However, the limitation associated with its reliability made McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992) revise the scale, which resulted in improved measurement, including the analysis of leadership dynamics (N'gbala & Hilton, 2023).

This refined framework has since been used to explain how leaders interpret their successes and failures, and their emotional experiences, including anger, guilt, hopelessness, pride, pity, and shame (Weiner, 2019). He added three important dimensions to attribution theory: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. These dimensions help explain how individuals assign responsibility for events:

1. Locus of causality determines whether someone attributes an event to internal factors (e.g., their abilities) or external factors (e.g., lack of resources) (Gonzalez, 2016; Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2017).
2. Stability examines whether a cause is consistent (e.g., financial constraints) or inconsistent (e.g., temporary staff shortage) (Gonzalez, 2016; Maki et al., 2023).
3. Controllability explores whether an individual believes the causes are within their control (e.g., leadership skill) or if it is outside their control (e.g., external economic conditions) (Gonzalez, 2016; Maki et al., 2023).

These dimensions are useful for exploring why nonprofits executives decide to leave their roles as they shed light on how leaders interpret the challenges they face and how their perceptions shape their decisions.

Nonprofit executives face unique stressors, including limited resources, emotional labor, and complex stakeholder relationships (Robichau et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2020). Applying Attribution theory can help understand factors contributing to their work-life balance issues, which can inform strategies for improvement (Martinko, 2018). Executives can use attributional dimensions like controllable and intentionality to assess whether work-life balance issues are within their control or due to external factors beyond their control (Markino, 2018). For instance, executives struggling to maintain a healthy work-life balance, and who believe it is due to external or uncontrollable factors, such as an uncooperative board or ongoing funding challenges, may start to feel helpless. This sense of helplessness can lead to frustration and eventually, the decision to leave their role (Huning & Thomson,

2011). On the other hand, an executive who believes that their lack of work-life balance is due to internal or controllable factors may feel empowered to handle such issues and create a sense of control that can help the executives build resilience, stay motivated, and committed to their role (Huning & Thomson, 2011). Leaders can interpret and arrange their experiences by linking incidents to concrete reasons, helping them develop better decision-making strategies to address work-life balance (Markino, 2018; Winkler & Winkler, 2009; Zheng & Jin, 2009).

The way executives interpret success is equally important. According to Gupta (1999), Leaders who see organizational achievements as the result of their hard work and efforts (internal, controllable factors) often feel a stronger connection to their role and the organization's mission. Conversely, those who attribute successes to external factors, like luck or favorable circumstances, may feel less personally invested, which can weaken their commitment over time (Dzhaneryan et al., 2024). This suggests that personal characteristics play a significant role in how success is perceived, aligning with the idea that leaders who attribute success to internal factors may feel more connected to their roles (Gupta, 1999). Conversely, those attributing success to external factors may experience diminished personal investment, potentially weakening their commitment to the organization over time (Dzhaneryan et al., 2024, Gupta, 1999).

Based on the reviewed literature, applying the Attribution Theory to work-life balance offers several benefits. Bella (2023) notes that it enhances understanding of how executives perceive and manage their professional and personal responsibilities. It could establish clear boundaries between work and personal life, which is essential for maintaining a healthy work-life, including setting limits on working hours and disengaging from work-related communication during personal time (Bella, 2023). By clarifying how executives assign credit and blame, organizations can implement interventions that promote a healthier work-life balance and quality of work life culture (Gibson & McCann, 2012).

While Attribution Theory offers valuable insights, it is important to consider that our attributions to situations can sometimes be biased or inaccurate. Leaders, like anyone else, may misjudge causes due to personal biases or gaps in information, which can result in ineffective decisions. Therefore, it is crucial for nonprofit executives to question their assumptions and seek diverse perspectives to evaluate their attributions and ensure a comprehensive understanding of their work-life balance issues.

Time and Energy Demands

Time and energy-related work stress are prominent today, which is especially true for the nonprofit sector, where people are willing to self-sacrifice to contribute to organizational performance (Palumbo et al., 2022). Research has highlighted the effect time-related stress has on work-life balance. For instance, Palumbo et al. (2022) discovered that time constraints hinder healthy work-life balance. According to Lott and Wöhrmann (2022), high working time demands lead to increased work-life conflict, reducing satisfaction with work-life balance. This indicates that the acceleration of work pace and intensified working time patterns such as long and irregular schedules are significant factors impacting work-life imbalance (Krings et al., 2010).

Nonprofit executives often face intense time, and energy demands due to the wide-ranging responsibilities of their roles. They manage everything from strategic planning, and fundraising to overseeing daily operations and engaging with stakeholders -all while staying deeply committed to the organization's mission (Tomar & Singh, 2023). At the same time, nonprofit leaders often must work with limited resources and staff, forcing executives to take on extra duties and work long hours to meet their goals (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Pierce, 2022). This demanding workload can take a significant toll on executives. Research shows

that constant juggling of responsibilities and multitasking leads to mental and emotional exhaustion (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Nonprofit executives often find themselves working late nights and weekends to meet the needs of donors, volunteers, and community partners (Szabo, 2010). With little time to rest and recharge, their ability to manage stress and stay focused begins to dwindle.

Over time, the nonstop pace of nonprofit leadership can erode job satisfaction and personal well-being (Bauld et al., 2009), leaving leaders to experience decision fatigue, reduced creativity, and an increased risk of mistakes, which only adds to their stress (LaRock, 2023). Many nonprofit executives also need help to set boundaries between work and personal life, feeling that their commitment to the mission leaves no room to slow down or delegate tasks (Riforgiate & Kramer, 2021). Beyond the long hours, nonprofit leadership requires a great deal of emotional labor. Executives run the organization and nurture relationships with staff, stakeholders, and the communities they serve (Pierce, 2022). This emotional investment, combined with limited time and energy, often leaves leaders feeling stretched thin and exhausted (Taube et al., 2024).

The foregoing research shows that the impact of time and energy demands extends beyond individual leaders, to impact the organization (Schwartz & McCarthy, 2007). When executives are overburdened, decision-making slows, staff morale declines, and key initiatives may fall behind (Phillips-Wren & Adya, 2020). Since it is hard to escape time pressures in modern work environments, organizations should protect executives against the backlash of time-related stress. They need to create systems that distribute responsibilities more evenly. Providing support, like time management tools or access to executive coaching, can also help leaders manage their workload (Katz, 2021). Encouraging executives to set boundaries and prioritize self-care can go a long way toward building a healthier, more sustainable work environment (Bronee, 2022). By addressing these issues, nonprofits can support their leaders, improve organizational effectiveness, and reduce executive turnover.

Chronic Stress and Burnout

Chronic stress and burnout among nonprofit executives are significantly tied to work-life balance (Haruna, 2023). Burnout, a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion from prolonged stress, is all too common in nonprofit leadership (Ivančević et al., 2022). Executives often work long hours, take on heavy workloads, and face the emotional strain of mission-driven work, which together creates a cycle of relentless stress (Arora et al., 2022; Young, 2023) and ultimately attrition (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Due to these stressors, nonprofit executives often struggle to find time for self-care or recovery, leaving them more vulnerable to burnout (LaRock, 2023). Unlike temporary stress, chronic stress lingers, wearing down resilience and increasing the risk of mental and physical health problems and outcome choices (Alvarez, 2017; Shishkova, 2024). The emotional investment required in nonprofit work makes it even harder for leaders to disconnect, as their commitment to the mission ties their personal well-being to their professional responsibilities (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Leaders dealing with chronic stress often experience reduced job satisfaction, impaired decision-making, and strained relationships with their boards, teams, and stakeholders (Babb, 2023). When burnout becomes too much, it frequently leads to executive turnover, leaving organizations without steady leadership during critical times (LaRock, 2023). According to Salalila (2024), the consequences of burnout go beyond individual well-being – it can destabilize the entire organization (Salalila, 2024). The cycle of stress faced by executives affects both the executives and the organization they serve (DeFrank et al., 2000). To break this cycle of stress or executives, nonprofits need to promote work-life balance by offering resources that can help mitigate the negative effects of stress (McEvoy, 2022) and

develop resilience during challenging environments and situations (Babb, 2023). By taking these steps, organizations can help their leaders achieve a healthy balance, reduce stress and burnout, and foster long-terms stability, which are essential for retaining leaders and maintaining organizational success.

Organizational Culture and Governance

Organizational culture acts as a social control mechanism to shape values, beliefs, and behaviors, while governance establishes the framework for accountability and decision-making (Lawal et al. 2024). According to Mansour et al. (2024), organizational culture and governance are linked together, shaping the experiences of leaders, including their decisions to leave their roles. In their study, Mansour et al. (2024), indicate that good governance contributes to a positive organizational culture. However, due to the operational characteristics of nonprofits, executives operate under governance models that rely on the board of directors (Newman, 2024; Stewart, 2016). Nonprofits with their distinct governance structures and deeply rooted cultural norms, nonprofits can either create an environment that supports executives by fostering trust or create pressures that lead to attrition (Molk & Sokol, 2021).

For nonprofit leaders, navigating organizational culture and governance can be challenging, creating pressures for executives (Ajuwon & Dagunduron, 2024), who often operate in environments where resources are limited, and expectations are high with diverse stakeholders (Pierce, 2022). This type of management structure allows for decision-making power to spread among different groups of people, like boards, committees, or leaders in various departments, which can make it harder to make a quick decision, leading to slower decision-making processes that affect organizational efficiency and attrition rates (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019; Wood, 1970). When the organizational culture aligns with an executive's values, it can inspire commitment and improve outcomes (Shah & Kundi, 2023). However, when the alignment is lacking, it can lead to frustration, stress and burnout, and if the misalignment persists, it can impact leadership retention (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Nedelko & Brzozowski, 2017; Vincent, 2024). Research has shown that nonprofit executives frequently encounter tensions when organizational culture and governance structures fail to support their leadership (Nedelko & Brzozowski, 2017; Vincent, 2024). Misalignment with values or unclear governance processes can leave leaders feeling unsupported and overwhelmed, making it difficult for them to perform effectively or stay motivated in their roles (Rampersad et al., 2014). Over time, these frustrations contribute to higher rates of executive turnover, leaving organizations without consistent leadership at critical moments (Kahn et al., 1964; Swetnam, 2004; Vincent, 2024).

Another helpful conceptual framework researchers have used to examine leadership attrition is role theory (Gibb, 1958). Role Theory focuses on the expectations associated with specific roles within an organization (Winkler, 2010). Through Mead's work on symbolic interactionism, he explored how roles through social interaction are shaped (Mead, 1934). Other researchers, such as Biddle (1986), Kahn et al., (1964), Parsons (1951), and later expanded on the theoretical foundation for role theory to develop its application to sociology, psychology, and organizational studies. Parsons's idea was to integrate role theory into structural-functional theory of society. For instance, he emphasized the importance of roles in maintaining social order (Parsons, 1951). Within the organizational context, Biddle offers a comprehensive approach to role theory (Biddle, 1986) while Kahn informed the application of role theory, focusing on role conflict and ambiguity in work environments (Kahn et al., 1964). This foundation is helpful in exploring the complexities of leadership roles and the factors contributing to executive attrition.

By applying Role Theory, this study will explore organizational culture and governance and their impact on executive attrition through alignment with organizational values and governance challenges. Understanding how the misalignment between executive values and role expectations impacts executives is crucial to role theory (Shukla et al., 2024). Similarly, Role theory helps in understanding the impact unclear expectations have on executives (Kabiri, 2014).

Alignment with Organizational Values

For nonprofit executives, a strong alignment between personal values and the organization's mission is essential for job satisfaction and long-term commitment (Praningrum et. al., 2023). Research indicates that executive attrition is influenced by how well an organizational culture aligns with an executive's values, suggesting that misalignment between the executive values and the organization's culture can result in dissatisfaction and burnout, all of which contribute to executive attrition (Nedelko & Brzozowski, 2017; Vincent, 2024). Executives whose personal values align with organizational values experience higher satisfaction and loyalty, reducing the likelihood of attrition (Hoffman, 1993).

Role theory highlights the importance of role clarity and value alignment in creating a sense of purpose and satisfaction within leadership roles (Kahn et al., 1964). When executives feel deeply connected to the organization's mission, they are more likely to find meaning in their work and remain engaged in their roles (Frydman, 2015; Mead, 1934). However, tension arises when organizational culture fails to support executives or when there is a misalignment between an executive's values and the organization's practices, highlighting the limitations of conformity (Bousalham, 2022). For instance, nonprofit executives who are passionate about innovation and collaboration may feel constrained by a rigid or overly hierarchical culture. Such misalignments between professional role expectations and personal values can create tension and lead to role conflict, where the expectations of the role clash with the executive's personal values or professional approach (Shukla et al., 2024; Swetnam, 2004). This tension not only frustrates executives but may also lead to feelings of disengagement and a loss of purpose, making executives more likely to leave their positions (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003).

In addition to value misalignment, an organizational culture that fails to foster inclusivity, transparency, or support can make executives feel isolated and undervalued (Kappal & Mishra, 2023; Kappal & Mishra, 2024). Role ambiguity, where leaders are uncertain about their responsibilities or how they fit within the organization, compounds these issues and positively influences turnover (Silva & Rodrigues, 2024). Understanding how roles are activated can shed light on executive functioning (Frydman, 2015). For nonprofit leaders who are already navigating demanding and emotionally taxing roles, these cultural challenges can erode their resilience and commitment over time (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Addressing these cultural barriers and misalignments is vital for creating a work environment where executives can thrive (Vrânceanu & Irina, 2015). Organizations that prioritize inclusivity, clarity, and alignment between personal and organizational values are more likely to retain effective leaders and foster long-term stability (Vrânceanu & Irina, 2015).

Governance Challenges

Governance structures in nonprofit organizations often add complexity to the role of executive leaders (Petrovits & Yetman, 2023). Boards of directors, which wield considerable influence, can either be a critical support system or a source of conflict (Walker et al., 2015). Role theory emphasizes the importance of clarity in roles and

expectations to reduce ambiguity and foster alignment between executives and their organizations (Lee et. al., 2019, Swetnam, 2004). According to Didericksen et al. (2024), Role theory helps explain how unclear or conflicting expectations between boards and executives can lead to role tension and uncertainty. Nonprofit executives are frequently expected to juggle multiple roles – decision-makers, operational leaders, and mediators between boards, staff, and stakeholders (Didericksen et al., 2024). These overlapping responsibilities often result in competing priorities and confusion about where their authority begins and ends (Nanus & Dobbs, 1999).

Decision-making dynamics within nonprofit governance further complicate matters. For example, some boards may overstep and exercise excessive control over strategic decisions, leaving executives with little or no room to implement their vision (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003). On the other hand, boards that lack engagement or fail to provide sufficient oversight can leave leaders feeling isolated and unsupported. This lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities often contributes to frustration, reduced morale, and, eventually, turnover (Florah, 2017). Consensus-driven decision-making or the reliance on board members can add additional challenges. Unlike for-profit organizations, nonprofit boards often consist of diverse stakeholders with various skill sets, making it challenging to establish clear governance protocols (Mitchell et al, 2021). These dynamics frequently lead to delays in decision-making (Swetnam, 2024).

Nonprofit organizations need to take proactive steps to address governance challenges and retain effective executives, such as implementing formal board agreements that can strengthen governance by clearly outlining roles, responsibilities, and expectations for board members. This allows for practices that have been shown to improve board performance and organizational capacity (Carman & Millisen, 2023; Petrovits & Yetman, 2023). Utilizing self-assessments tools that allow the board to evaluate their performance and identify areas for improvement will help reduce ambiguity and align board members and executives on performance expectations (Carman & Millisen, 2023). Promoting an organizational culture that values inclusivity and support for leadership ensures that the executive feels empowered to make decisions that support these values (Yadav & Tanwar, 2024).

By creating a culture of alignment and addressing governance challenges, nonprofits can ease the pressures on executives, reduce stress, and improve job satisfaction. These efforts will help retain talented leaders and contribute to greater organizational stability and long-term success.

Board and Stakeholders Role

Boards and stakeholders significantly shape the leadership landscape of nonprofit organizations (Carman & Milisen, 2023), and their input impacts key decisions, from governance to resource allocation (McMullin & Raggo, 2020; Newman, 2024). However, the relationship between nonprofit executives, boards, and stakeholders is often complex and occasionally faced with challenges. While executives manage daily operations and address immediate organizational needs, the boards concentrate on governance and long-term strategy (Rhine & Pension, 2022). Even with delineation of roles, research indicates that there is often a disconnect between what nonprofits executives expect from their boards and the actual involvement of stakeholders and boards, which may not align with the mission and leadership priorities of the organization (LeRoux & Langer, 2016). These misaligned priorities, communication gaps, and external pressures from donors or volunteers can strain these relationships, making it difficult for executives to lead effectively (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003).

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) offers a framework for understanding how dynamics contribute to executive stress and turnover, as it explores the impact of external pressures and limited resources on leadership and organizational stability. According to

Weiner (2019), RDT posits that organizations are dependent on external resources to ensure functionality and the ability to secure these resources affects organizational stability and leadership retention. In addition, RDT offers insights into how external pressures and resource constraints influence executive turnover. Introduced originally by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) as an effort to integrate different perspectives on organizational change, however, their work was shaped by earlier contributions, resulting in a theory that synthesis of various research efforts.

RDT examines the relationships among funding sources and management practices (Bullock, 2022). Organizations are dependent on external resources to ensure functionality and their ability to secure these resources affects organizational stability and leadership retention (Weiner, 2019). As a result, organizations must manage their dependence on these external resources, which can create vulnerabilities when access to these resources is limited (Ab Samad & Ahmad, 2022). This challenge is particularly true for nonprofits that must carefully manage their funding sources to avoid mission drift (Bullock, 2022).

The constant pressure to meet stakeholder expectations and navigate dependencies while trying to maintain organizational stability can create a challenging environment and stress for executive leaders (Gai et. al., 2022). The pressure adds to the heavy demands of their roles, making their positions especially hard to maintain over time.

Board-Executive Relationship

The relationship between nonprofit executives and their board is a critical factor in leadership retention, as poor communication and unclear expectations can lead to conflict, and eventually, turnover (Mathew et al., 2024). On the other hand, a positive relationship between nonprofit executives and board fosters trust and open communication, encourages collaboration, and mitigates the sense of isolation (Lewis, 2022; Molina et al., 2021), thereby leading to higher satisfaction levels among executives and boards (Didericksen et al., 2024). When boards and executives maintain clear communication and work toward shared goals, they cultivate a collaborative atmosphere that promotes stability and a unified vision (Geada, 2023). These benefits are consistent with the findings of a recent survey carried out on executive officers, which revealed that 66.66% of the participants left their position due to lack of support from the board, highlighting the importance of a supportive board-executive relationship and further emphasizing the need for trust and respect between the board and executives (Mathew et al., 2024). Conversely, conflicts – such as differing leadership strategies, micromanagement, or lack of trust – can leave executives feeling unsupported or undermined (Allcorn, 2022; Cangemi, 2000).

Resource Dependency Theory helps to explain how power dynamics in board-executive relationships contribute to leadership challenges. By virtue of their control over resources like funding and stakeholder connections, boards often hold significant influence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Tripathi, 2021). When boards fail to provide sufficient support or impose unrealistic demands without the necessary resources, executives may feel constrained in their ability to lead effectively (Boivie et al, 2016). This lack of support can lead to feelings of constraint in the executives' role (Wisdom, 2007). This dynamic is especially pronounced in resource-scarce environments, where boards may prioritize securing donor relationships over addressing pressing operational needs, placing additional strain on executives (Heimovics et al., 1993; Jönsson & Huzzard, 2021).

The board-executive relationship is also influenced by communication. Poor communication characterized by unclear expectations, lack of transparency, or inconsistent feedback can exacerbate misunderstandings and dissatisfaction (Didericksen, et al., 2024; Steimel, 2024;). Findings suggest that a leadership approach, supported by clear roles and responsibilities, fosters a collaborative environment (Didericksen et. al., 2024). Studies found that effective communication is essential for reducing uncertainty input (Lewis, 2022). By

fostering open, effective communication, enabling a more supportive environment where executives work productively with their board.

Stakeholder Expectations

Nonprofit stakeholders, including donors, volunteers, and community members play a crucial role in sustaining nonprofit organizations, yet their conflicting priorities can place significant demands on executive leaders (Newman, 2024). For instance, while donors may push for specific outcomes tied to their contributions, volunteers may focus on different community needs, creating tension that executives must navigate carefully. Plaisance (2023) emphasizes the need for executives to differentiate and prioritize stakeholders' needs based on their resources, contributions, and influence; this way executives can balance priorities effectively.

RDT emphasizes the reliance of nonprofits on external resources, such as donations and volunteer efforts, which grants stakeholders substantial influence over organizational decisions (Weiner, 2009). This dependency pressures executives to balance competing demands, often forcing difficult compromises that may conflict with internal priorities or even the organization's core mission (Godkin & Allcorn, 2009). The role of executives in managing stakeholder relationships also adds to the burden (Freeman, 2022). Executives are held accountable for unmet stakeholders' demands regardless of whether the demands are unrealistic or beyond their control (Newman, 2024). Further, executives can be scapegoated as they are primarily responsible for providing a symbolic mechanism for the organization to meet external demands (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). As described in RDT, this scapegoating phenomenon can lead to frustration, diminished morale, leaving executives feeling overwhelmed, and eventual turnover (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2015). As a result, executives need to understand the dynamics of dependence and dependency so that they can exercise authority effectively while balancing competing stakeholders' demands (Carr, 2018).

To address these issues requires organizations to strengthen board-executive relationships by encouraging clear communication between board and executives, aligning and setting realistic stakeholder expectations with organizational priorities, and reducing resource dependency by diversifying funding resources to reduce reliance on any single or group of stakeholders. By understanding the power dynamics and external pressures that influence board-executive relationships, nonprofits can create a more supportive environment for executives, reducing stress and turnover while ensuring long-term success.

Personal Factors and Experiences

The personal factors influencing executive turnover are complex and often intertwined with the executives' experiences (Stewart, 2016; Evans et al., 2018). Nonprofit executives operate in a demanding environment that requires a combination of professional expertise, emotional intelligence, and alignment with organizational mission (Young & Searing, 2022). According to Stirratt (2019), the executives' roles are deeply personal and mission-driven, and it fuels their commitment to the organization's mission and goals (Masoud & Basahal, 2023). However, when executives are not driven by organizational mission, they become disengaged (Christle, 2019).

This disengagement is compounded when their perceived opportunities for satisfaction diminish, leading too many executives to leave their roles (Duffield et al., 2011). Attribution theory provides a framework for understanding these decisions, exploring how executives assign responsibility for the challenges they face, whether as internal or external causes or controllable or uncontrollable causes. For instance, personal factors such as emotional

resilience or career aspirations, often shape how executives interpret and respond to their experiences (Korotov, 2021; Olson et. al., 2023; Peters et al., 2023, Westby et al., 2023).

Perceived lack of Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development is critical for enhancing job satisfaction, career fulfillment, and retention (Hollar, et al., 2022; Nasution et al., 2024). Without adequate career development opportunities, many executives may feel stagnant in their roles, impacting their commitment and performance and ultimately leading to attrition (Hollar et al., 2022; Sheridan, 2012). Attribution theory explains how these executives interpret the causes of stagnation they face. For instance, some executives who see the lack of professional development as external and uncontrollable, such as limited budgets or insufficient investment, may feel helpless, leading to dissatisfaction and eventual exit from the organization. Other executives who see the lack of professional development because of internal and controllable factors may seek opportunities for mentorship programs. While this perspective may empower actions, the reality is that nonprofit executives often lack the time and resources to take advantage of mentoring or training programs, reinforcing feelings of frustration (Dieg, 2022). When executive perceive that the lack of professional development is unlikely to change, executives may feel compelled to look for roles that prioritize their growth. This aligns with Gerasimov & Gerasimov (2017) findings that emphasize the relevance of continuous development opportunities in enhancing executive leadership.

Identity and Role Fit

According to Kristoffersen (2021), professional identity plays a valuable role in commitment, in that alignment with professional values contributes to retention. Nonprofit executives benefit from a sense of alignment between personal identity and professional role, which fosters engagement and effectiveness (Kristoffersen, 2021). However, a misalignment can negatively impact retention when there is a disconnect between an executive's identity and their role (Crossman, 2016). Attrition theory helps to explain how leaders interpret their identity or fit within the organization. Executives who attribute misalignment to external factors, such as mismatched role fitness, are more likely to feel frustrated, disengaged, and see little or no opportunity to enact meaningful change. On the other hand, executives who view the misalignment because of internal or controllable factors, such as their approach or leadership, may try to adjust their expectations. While this can help in the short term, deeper conflicts in values or goals may persist, making turnover probable (Drori et al., 2009).

Moreover, executives often see themselves as stewards of their organization's mission, ensuring that their action reflects their commitment to the mission (Crotts et al., 2005). When their identity does not align with the organization's priorities, it creates a disconnect from organizational commitment (Crotts, et al., 2005). This disconnect not only undermines the executives' sense of purpose but also hinders their ability to lead effectively, prompting them to leave their roles. Some actionable insights to address this challenge include investing in professional development through accessible programs for skill-building and mentorship, providing emotional well-being resources such as counseling, stress management training across the organization focused on the needs of executives (Otte, 2024), and emphasizing mission alignment during recruitment and onboarding to ensure executives feel a strong connection to their work (Azour & McGuinness, 2023). Addressing identity misalignment and role fit can strengthen a leader's commitment and create a more stable work environment for sustained leadership.

Hilda Eke Leadership Attrition Protection Model

Section	Description
Introduction	Executive attrition is a critical concern in nonprofit organizations, affecting organizational stability and mission fulfillment. Nonprofit executives operate in a demanding environment requiring professional expertise, emotional intelligence, and alignment with the organizational mission. The Hilda Eke Leadership Attrition Protection Model provides a structured approach to mitigating executive turnover by addressing key personal and organizational factors contributing to attrition.
Model Framework	This model is based on Attribution Theory, which explains how nonprofit executives assign responsibility for challenges they face. It incorporates strategies focused on professional development, identity alignment, well-being support, governance improvements, and stakeholder engagement to enhance retention and leadership sustainability.
Professional Development Opportunities	Lack of career development leads to stagnation and dissatisfaction. Organizations should implement structured leadership development programs, executive coaching, and mentorship opportunities to foster career growth.
Identity and Role Fit	Executives need alignment between their personal identity and professional roles. Nonprofits should ensure mission alignment during recruitment and onboarding while providing platforms for executives to shape their roles to match their strengths.
Executive Well-Being Programs	Nonprofit leaders face high stress levels that impact job satisfaction. Organizations should establish well-being programs, including mental health support, counseling services, and stress management training.
Leadership Development and Succession Planning	Effective succession planning ensures smooth transitions and reduces disruptions. Nonprofits should develop talent pipelines and clear leadership pathways to prevent leadership gaps.
Financial Incentives and Benefits	Competitive compensation remains a major challenge in the nonprofit sector. To retain top leaders, organizations should explore performance-based bonuses, retention incentives, and executive benefit packages.
Mentorship and Peer Support Networks	Executive mentorship programs provide guidance, career development, and emotional support to nonprofit leaders, helping them navigate challenges and reduce isolation.
Address Organizational and Process-Related Stressors	Systemic issues such as workload pressures, governance inefficiencies, and funding constraints should be addressed to improve executive retention.
Promote Work-Life Balance	Nonprofits should implement flexible work arrangements, sabbatical policies, and mental health resources to mitigate burnout and sustain leadership effectiveness.
Strengthen Stakeholder and Donor Engagement	Executive retention improves when leaders feel supported by stakeholders, donors, and board members. Fostering collaborative relationships helps ease leadership burdens.
Develop Knowledge Management Systems	To mitigate institutional knowledge loss, nonprofits should establish structured documentation processes, including strategic plans, stakeholder relationships, and operational insights.
Emotional Intelligence and Resilience Training	Training programs focused on emotional intelligence and resilience-building help nonprofit executives develop coping mechanisms to navigate leadership pressures.

Conduct Exit Interviews and Organizational Assessments	Structured exit interviews help organizations identify attrition factors and refine retention strategies based on executive feedback.
Enhance Board-Executive Collaboration	Strengthening governance structures and improving collaboration between executives and boards ensures executives receive adequate support.
Advocate for Nonprofit Leadership Policies	Organizations should engage in advocacy efforts to secure funding, policy changes, and structural support mechanisms that enhance nonprofit executive sustainability.
Reimagine Leadership Models	Exploring shared leadership structures, co-leadership models, and distributed leadership approaches can reduce the burden on a single executive leader.
Conclusion	Nonprofit organizations face an ongoing leadership crisis due to high executive attrition rates. The Hilda Eke Leadership Attrition Protection Model provides a comprehensive framework addressing key personal, organizational, and systemic challenges that contribute to executive turnover. By focusing on professional development, identity alignment, executive well-being, governance improvements, and stakeholder engagement, nonprofits can create a sustainable leadership pipeline, enhance retention, and ensure mission continuity.

Conclusion

Executive attrition is a critical concern in nonprofit organizations, affecting organizational stability and mission fulfillment. (Tebbe et al., 2017; Santora et al; 2015; Stewart, 2016; Kaplan, 2001). This literature review explores the various factors that contribute to executive attrition, highlighting the unique challenges executives face in their roles. While nonprofit work is mission-driven, it often places exceptional pressure on leaders (Vivian & Hormann, 2015) complicating retention efforts (Clerkin, et al., 2023).

The above research highlights work-life balance and stress as one of the primary pressures nonprofit executives face in their role. The blurred boundaries of nonprofit leadership, characterized by long hours of work, high emotional demands, and the constant juggling of personal and professional responsibilities create stress, and eventually burnout (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The Attribution theory offers a framework for understanding personal factors that contribute to nonprofit executives' work-life balance and stress issues (Martinko, 2018).

Organizational culture and governance are also explored as other factors affecting executive attrition. The alignment or misalignment between an executive's personal values and the mission of the organization plays a critical role in executives' decision to stay or leave their roles (Kristoffersen, 2021). Understanding how the misalignment between executive values and role expectations impacts executives is crucial to role theory (Shukla et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of fostering collaborative governance systems aligned with organizational goals.

The relationship between executives, boards, and stakeholders is pivotal. However, communication gaps, conflicting priorities, and the external pressures of meeting stakeholder expectations often strain these relationships, contributing to turnover (Heimovics et al., 1993). Resource dependency examines the board-executive relationship that contributes to attrition and how executives interpret board and stakeholders' actions (Pferrer & Salancik, 1978; Tripathi, 2021). Literature highlights executives need to understand the relationship and dynamics between the dependence and dependency context so that they can exercise authority effectively while balancing competing stakeholders' demands (Carr, 2018).

Effective leadership in nonprofit organizations requires a thoughtful approach to understanding the factors that contribute to executive turnover. Nonprofits that focus on aligning, fostering transparent governance structure, promoting work-life balance, and offering professional development opportunities are essential in reducing turnover (Moore & Goodwin, 2013; Selden & Sowa, 2015). As nonprofits continue to face societal challenges, ensuring effective leadership will become even more important (Masoud & Basahal, 2023; Newman, 2024).

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