

Leading Through Chaos: Tackling Turnover in Philippine Start-ups with Transformational Leadership

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Abstract: The Philippine start-up ecosystem has experienced rapid growth in recent years, with innovation-driven ventures emerging across technology, retail, creative industries, and social enterprises. Despite this upward trajectory, start-ups continue to face a persistent and critical challenge: high employee turnover. This issue is particularly concerning given the already limited resources and lean teams typical of early-stage ventures. High turnover can disrupt operations, stall growth, and increase recruitment and training costs. One potential solution lies in leadership—specifically, transformational leadership (TL), which is known to inspire, motivate, and retain employees by fostering trust and shared purpose. This study investigates the impact of TL on turnover intention (TI) in Philippine start-ups, focusing on the mediating roles of job satisfaction (JS) and organizational commitment (OC), and the moderating effects of role ambiguity (RA) and role overload (RO), two common stressors in start-up settings. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources Model and Social Exchange Theory, the study employed an exploratory quantitative design using purposive sampling of 97 employees from various early-stage ventures. Data were collected through validated instruments, including the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and established scales for JS, OC, TI, RA, and RO. Statistical analyses revealed that TL significantly and negatively predicts TI, both directly and indirectly, through positive effects on JS and OC, confirming partial mediation. While RA and RO showed significant main effects, moderation analysis revealed they did not significantly alter the TL–JS relationship. Descriptive results underscored the value of inspirational motivation and autonomy in promoting satisfaction and loyalty. These findings offer practical guidance for start-up founders to refine leadership practices and improve employee retention strategies while contributing to theoretical developments by clarifying the pathways through which TL operates in high-pressure work settings.

Key Words: Transformational leadership; role stressors; turnover intention; job satisfaction; start-up

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The Philippine start-up ecosystem has grown rapidly, with the number of start-ups rising from 273 in 2017 to about 1,200 in 2024—a roughly 340% increase in seven (7) years (Balita, 2023; Startup Genome, 2025). The paper adopts the definition of start-ups based on the Innovative Startup Act or Republic Act 11337 (2019), which characterizes them as innovative entities with less than 500 employees and less than five (5) years of operation, often relying on external funding for growth. Start-ups have emerged as vital engines of innovation and economic growth in the Philippines, yet they often struggle with high employee turnover. Prior studies have highlighted that turnover rates in start-ups may reach as high as 54%, placing a significant burden on organizational productivity (Dayal, 2023). The dynamic, fast-paced nature of start-up environments intensifies these challenges, as employees are frequently confronted with role ambiguity and role overload (Nazir et al., 2022).

In parallel, transformational leadership (TL) has been widely recognized as a key driver in fostering positive employee outcomes. TL, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2005), has been widely linked to positive employee outcomes in stable organizations. Earlier research by Bass and Riggio (2005) and subsequent studies (Putri & Meria, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023) have demonstrated that transformational leaders inspire higher levels of job satisfaction (JS) and organizational commitment (OC), which are essential in mitigating turnover intentions (TI).

Empirical evidence indicates that TL not only uplifts the morale of employees but also enhances their emotional attachment to the organization (Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019). This attachment is critical for start-ups, as it can serve as a buffer against the detrimental effects of high job stress and ambiguous roles. Moreover, when employees experience increased JS and OC, they are less inclined to seek alternative employment opportunities. Building on these insights, the present study investigates the direct and indirect effects of TL on TI, testing the mediating roles of JS and OC.

Additionally, this research explores the potential moderating influence of role stressors—specifically, role ambiguity (RA) and role overload (RO)—on the relationship between TL and TI.

Role stressors manifest as RA and RO that make jobs more difficult to fulfill. Role stressors moderate JS and work engagement (Orgambidez & Extremera, 2020). High role stressors can amplify work stress and TI (Rangrez et al., 2022). TL mitigates these effects at low-moderate stress levels with engagement and stimulation (Díaz-Fúnez et al., 2021), but its influence on JS is unclear.

Furthermore, TI refers to an employee's desire to leave their organization (Ike et al., 2023), but this is not a guaranteed indicator of actual turnover. Lazzari et al. (2022) believe that it is a valuable proxy to assess potential employee turnover and the factors that influence it. Kanchana and Jayathilaka (2023) suggest that JS is a key factor influencing TI, as better satisfaction develops employees' emotional attachment to their organization. Meeting expectations on job roles, compensation, and work environment can improve JS. OC is a strong predictor of reduced turnover intention (Riyanto et al., 2023), as it reflects an employee's emotional attachment and alignment with the organization's goals. Committed employees are more likely to stay, viewing their success as tied to the organization and showing resilience even during challenges.

The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests that job demands, such as role stressors, interact with job resources such as TL to influence outcomes like retention (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). The model is concerned with the interaction between job demands and job resources, wherein high demand and insufficient resources lead to adverse effects. In parallel, Social Exchange Theory explains how reciprocal leader-employee relationships shape JS and OC (Simbula et al., 2023).

By integrating findings from previous studies with new empirical analyses, this study critically examines TL's influence in start-ups by exploring its impact on OC, JS, and TI, while also investigating the moderating role of role stressors. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how leadership behavior can be strategically leveraged to reduce TI in start-up environments. The overall objective is to not only validate existing theoretical models but also to propose actionable leadership strategies that enhance employee retention in high-pressure settings.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Conceptual Framework

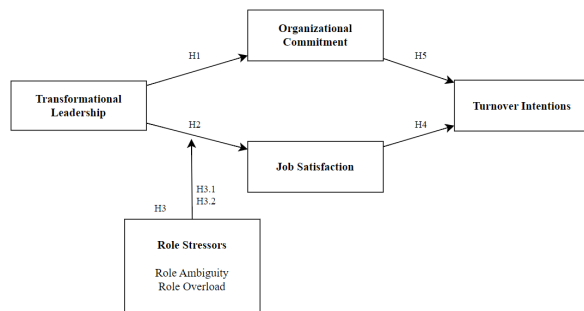


Fig 1. Conceptual framework (made by researchers)

Abouraira and Othman's (2017) inspired the conceptual framework in Fig 1. The researchers added RA and RO as moderators since these are the most common role stressors in start-up environments. This study explores whether the influence of TL on JS and OC is strengthened or weakened when role stressors are present at high levels, as commonly seen in start-up environments. With this, the paper proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: TL is positively related to OC.
- H2: TL is positively related to JS.
- H3: Role stressors
 - H3.1: RA moderates the relationship between TL and JS.
 - H3.2: RO moderates the relationship between TL and JS.
- H4: JS is negatively related to TI.
- H5: OC is negatively related to TI.

2.2 Research Design

An exploratory quantitative design (Saunders et al., 2019) targeted non-executive employees (n=91) in Philippine start-ups (operating <5 years, <500 employees, innovation-focused). Purposive sampling ensured alignment with start-up criteria (Innovative Startup Act, 2019).

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected via an online survey using Google Forms. Participants were purposely selected based on their experience—at least one year in a Philippine start-up— and exposure to TL (e.g., “My boss instills pride in others”; MLQ item). The MLQ items are the preliminary screening questions to ensure

participant eligibility for TL exposure. Ethical protocols were upheld, with informed consent and anonymization.

Validated instruments, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.84 to 0.93, were used to measure each variable: the MLQ (Bass & Avolio, 1995) for TL, the JS Scale (Warr et al., 1979), the OC Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1982), and the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al., 2008) for turnover intention. Role ambiguity and overload were measured using the Rizzo et al. (1970) and Reilly (1982) scales, respectively. Furthermore, a pre-test with 30 respondents was conducted to assess the fit with our population, confirming high reliability for all instruments with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.81 to 0.94.

Data was analyzed using Jamovi. A mediation analysis was conducted through JS and OC to estimate the indirect effects of TL on TI. In parallel, linear regressions were performed to determine the direct effects of JS, OC, and TL on TI. Moderation analyses were subsequently run to evaluate the interaction effects between TL and JS through the two role stressors (RA and RO). Model fit indices, standard errors, confidence intervals, and p-values were reported for all statistical tests.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final sample comprised 97 valid responses after initial screening, which retained 86.6% of the original 112 responses. Several responses were excluded due to issues such as uniform responses (e.g., all 5s or all 1s indicating inattentiveness), duplicate submissions, respondents indicating their bosses did not exhibit transformational leadership behaviors, and those not employed in start-ups.

Among the validated responses, the majority were 24 years old, representing 17.5% (17/97) of the sample. Most participants were female, accounting for 55.67% (54/97), and a large proportion—91.8%—had 1 to 3 years of experience in their respective start-ups.

All variables followed a 5-point Likert scale. Based on Table 1, TL, JS, OC, and TI have high mean scores, indicating that respondents generally report very positive perceptions regarding TL and favorable employee outcomes, with relatively low variability (or a

consensus) among participants. In contrast, the lower means for RA and RO imply that employees experience minimal stress in these domains, although the modest standard deviations for these variables hint at some variability in individual experiences.

Table 1. Descriptives of Variables

Var.	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
TL	1	5	4.57	.426
JS	1	5	4.45	.537
OC	1	5	4.27	.645
TI	1	5	4.47	.708
RA	1	5	1.73	.656
RO	1	5	2.58	.712

Linear regression analysis was conducted with TI as the dependent variable and JS, OC, and TL as predictors. In line with standard regression practices (Cohen et al., 2003), the overall model was statistically robust, with an *R* of 0.835 and an *R*² of 0.688 (adjusted *R*² = 0.688, *F*(3,91) = 68.0, *p* < 0.001). According to conventional criteria (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), this indicates that approximately 68.7% of the variance in TI is explained by these predictors. The model revealed that JS ($\beta = 0.817$, *p* < 0.001) and OC ($\beta = 0.470$, *p* < 0.001) positively predicted TI. Given that the TI scale was reverse-coded so that higher scores represent a lower intention to leave, these results demonstrate that increased JS and OC are associated with reduced TI. In contrast, TL maintained a significant negative direct effect on TI ($\beta = -0.300$, *p* = 0.042). These regression findings provide preliminary confirmation of the hypothesized relationships and set the stage for further testing via mediation analysis.

To examine whether JS and OC mediate the relationship between TL and TI, the researchers followed the conditions proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, TL significantly predicted the mediators—JS (estimate = 0.919, *p* < 0.001) and OC (estimate = 0.970, *p* < 0.001). Second, both JS (estimate = 0.817, *p* < 0.001) and OC (estimate = 0.470, *p* < 0.001) significantly predicted TI. Third, when the mediators

were included in the model, the direct effect of TL on TI became negative and smaller (estimate = -0.300, *p* = 0.035) compared to its total effect of 0.906 (*p* < 0.001). The mediation analysis yielded a significant indirect effect via JS of 0.751 (SE = 0.1378, 95% CI [0.481, 1.0208], $\beta = 0.451$, *z* = 5.45, *p* < 0.001) and via OC of 0.456 (SE = 0.1145, 95% CI [0.232, 0.6804], $\beta = 0.274$, *z* = 3.98, *p* < 0.001). Because the direct effect remained significant after the inclusion of the mediators, the results indicate a partial mediation. These findings support the notion that TL indirectly reduces TI through its enhancing effects on both JS and OC.

Then, the moderation analysis was conducted in line with the criteria outlined by Netemeyer et al. (2001), which require that (1) the causal predictor (TL) significantly predicts the dependent variable (TI) in the simple effects model, and (2) the interaction model (including the moderator) explains a significantly higher amount of variance than the model without the interaction term. For role ambiguity (RA), TL significantly predicted JS (estimate = 0.87851, *p* < 0.001); however, RA did not have a significant main effect (estimate = -0.00972, *p* = 0.866) and, importantly, the interaction term between TL and RA (estimate = 0.16014, *p* = 0.300) was not significant. Thus, the interaction model did not explain additional variance in TI, indicating that RA does not moderate the relationship between TL and JS. Similarly, for role overload (RO), although TL (estimate = 0.843, *p* < 0.001) and RO (estimate = -0.193, *p* < 0.001) both had significant main effects, the interaction term (TL×RO; estimate = 0.133, *p* = 0.106) failed to reach statistical significance. In both cases, because the addition of the interaction terms did not yield a significant increase in explanatory power, moderation is not supported for RA or RO. An overall summary of the tested hypotheses, including effect sizes and significance levels, can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path / Test	Estimate (95% CI)	p	Verdict
H1	TL → OC	.970 [0.760, 1.180]	< .001	✓
H2	TL → JS	.919 [0.744, 1.093]	< .001	✓
H3.1	TL × RA → JS	.160 [-0.142, 0.463]	0.3	✗
H3.2	TL × RO → JS	.133 [-0.029, 0.295]	0.106	✗
H4	JS → TI	.817 [0.567, 1.067]	< .001	✓
H5	OC → TI	.470 [0.262, 0.678]	< .001	✓

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the critical role of TL in reducing TI in Philippine start-ups. Quantitative findings revealed that TL indirectly lowers TI by enhancing JS and OC. Employees reported high levels of perceived TL behaviors, particularly those related to enthusiastic communication of goals, which aligned with strong feelings of autonomy and satisfaction in their roles. This aligns with previous studies wherein TL effectively reduces TI (Bass & Riggio, 2005; Eliyana & Ma'arif, 2019). Comparable studies in Sri Lanka, Bahrain, and Indonesia have noted similar effects, where transformational leadership fostered a positive workplace climate that reduced attrition (Kanchana & Jayathilaka, 2023; Pattali et al., 2024; Farahdiba et al., 2022). While JS and OC partially mediated the TL-TI relationship, commitment levels reflected some conditionality, likely due to the dynamic nature of start-up work.

Moreover, RA and RO did not significantly moderate the TL-JS relationship, suggesting that TL's positive impact remains consistent even in high-pressure environments. The findings contradict Díaz-Fúnez et al.'s (2021) study, which suggests that role stressors amplified burnout and reduced satisfaction. The results

suggest that the TL may have a buffering mechanism that allows leaders to address confusion or mitigate overload before it escalates.

JS emerged as the most influential factor in reducing turnover intentions because it reflects the employees' daily experience. This confirms Pratama et al.'s (2022) study that satisfied employees are more resistant to leaving. Employees develop stronger OC as their emotional connection and value alignment with the start-up grows. JS and OC attributed the strong TL influence on TI, which suggests that retention extends beyond compensation but involves cultivating strong psychological and emotional ties.

In the Philippine context, several companies have demonstrated how TL qualities translate into tangible outcomes. Kollab, recognized as the country's best small workplace (Manila Standard, 2025), showcases individualized consideration through its people-first practices, such as mental health breaks and learning stipends. Foundever (2024), a Great Place to Work awardee, exemplifies inspirational motivation by fostering shared goals and team purpose. Odfjell (2025), named Best Employer Brand, emphasizes idealized influence through ethical leadership and strong value alignment. These cases show that TL behaviors are not only effective in theory but also produce measurable engagement and satisfaction in Philippine firms. As such, the relevance of TL in the local context is reinforced both statistically and in practice, particularly for start-ups facing resource constraints and RA.

Future research can explore start-ups in other cultural and geographic contexts to assess whether these findings hold across different environments and cultures. The younger age and cultural context of Philippine employees are additional grounds for future research. While this study used an exploratory quantitative design to examine key relationships, qualitative or mixed-method approaches could offer deeper insight into how employees interpret and respond to leadership, which are perspectives not easily captured through surveys. These methods may also help address potential response biases and provide a richer understanding of retention in start-up settings.

From a practical standpoint, start-up founders can enhance retention by actively practicing TL principles. This includes practices such as tailored mentorship, regular team check-ins, offering flexible work processes, soliciting input on decision-making, and ensuring employees understand how their roles



contribute to the organization's overall mission (Fatin & Mazlan, 2023). Embedding these practices can help create a more stable work environment despite role-related stress.

For investors, these findings underscore the value of assessing leadership quality alongside financial metrics. Start-ups that demonstrate strong leadership practices, such as empowering teams and maintaining clear, motivational communication, are more likely to retain talent and manage operational demands effectively. Supporting leadership development in portfolio companies can therefore be a strategic lever for long-term growth and stability.

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