
Emotional Intelligence Training for Leaders: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

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Abstract

In the current landscape of organizations, which are often intricate, ever-changing, and swift, Emotional Intelligence (EI) stands out as a critical competency for effective leadership. While numerous leaders possess a grasp of EI concepts such as self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation, translating this understanding into consistent practice within their leadership roles often proves challenging. This article examines how well-designed Emotional Intelligence training programs can assist leaders in overcoming this chasm between knowing and doing. The paper delves into experiential learning, coaching methodologies, mindfulness practices, and feedback mechanisms as key strategies for converting EI knowledge into tangible leadership behaviors. This is achieved by leveraging established EI frameworks, leadership theories, adult learning principles, and applied training models. Real-world examples drawn from Indian organizations and educational institutions are presented to illustrate the tangible impacts of EI training on decision-making processes, team dynamics, employee engagement, and the overall organizational climate. Furthermore, the article provides an overview of best practices, hurdles, and limitations encountered in the development and evaluation of EI training programs within the Indian context. The study concludes that continuous, context-specific EI training—supported by regular feedback, reflective practices, and alignment with organizational objectives—is vital for enhancing leadership effectiveness and fostering enduring organizational prosperity.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Development, Experiential Learning, Coaching, Organizational effectiveness.

1. Introduction

In today's world, leadership goes far beyond just technical know-how, administrative prowess, or the simple exercise of authority. Modern leaders must operate in environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous often referred to by the acronym VUCA. Navigating these conditions demands that leaders make smart strategic choices while also skillfully managing emotions, both their own and those of their teams, all while encouraging motivation, trust, and teamwork. As organizations become increasingly diverse and knowledge-based, successful leadership increasingly hinges on emotional and social intelligence, rather than exclusively on cognitive or technical skills.

Subsequently, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a crucial skill for contemporary leaders. Broadly speaking, EI involves the ability to effectively recognize, understand, manage, and use emotions in oneself and others. Research from areas such as organizational psychology, leadership studies, and human resource development continually indicates that leaders with high EI are better at building trust, resolving

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conflicts constructively, communicating effectively, and creating psychologically safe work environments. These leaders also exhibit enhanced resilience, adaptability, and an ability to guide teams through periods of change and uncertainty.

Even with the growing recognition of EI's importance, a paradox remains in leadership development. While many leaders are acquainted with EI concepts through management education, training sessions, and popular publications, they often struggle to consistently apply these skills in their day-to-day leadership roles. Leaders may grasp the value of empathy, emotional regulation, and self-awareness, but under pressure from stress, time limitations, or organizational politics, they often revert to established behaviors that undermine emotionally intelligent leadership.

This paper argues that the main obstacle in EI-based leadership development isn't a lack of knowledge, but rather the gap between knowing and doing. EI training, when designed as an ongoing developmental process rather than a one-off event, can bridge this divide by promoting behavioral change, increasing emotional awareness, and encouraging reflective practice. The goal of this thematic paper is to explore how EI training programs can help leaders translate theoretical understanding into practical leadership behaviors, specifically within the context of Indian organizations and educational settings.

2. Emotional Intelligence in Leadership

In this section it needed to evaluate the previous studies conducted in the similar studies. Kotsou et al. (2011) employed a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design and utilized biological markers namely, cortisol levels to offer objective evidence of the effectiveness of training, this study is particularly significant (Benton & Gruicic (2015)). The five emotional competencies that the study aimed to develop through the intervention are recognizing emotions in oneself and in others, understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, expressing emotions in a socially acceptable manner, regulating one's own and others' emotional states, and employing emotions to enhance cognitive functions. To consolidate the gains, an email reinforcement phase lasting four weeks was implemented after the intervention (Gruicic, D., & Benton, S. (2015)). The findings showed that there was a significant rise in emotional competencies among the experimental group, and this was not seen in the control group. The study showed that the rise in emotional competence led to enhanced mental and physical health. The results are a strong refutation of the idea that emotional intelligence cannot be increased, and it is evident that the period of adulthood is a rich time for the development of socioemotional skills that are required for effective leadership.

Nowacki et al. (2020) carried out a landmark longitudinal study to analyze the growth of physician leaders over a period of ten years (Dewsnap et al., (2021)). The study aimed to identify the relationship between the emotional intelligence competencies of physicians and their subsequent promotion to leadership and managerial positions (Dewsnap et al., (2021)). Physicians who were promoted twice to leadership positions demonstrated emotional competencies compared to those who were promoted once or not at all (Delhom et al., (2022)). The competencies largely involved self-awareness, self-management, and empathy (Dewsnap et al., (2021)). The findings of this study have

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far-reaching implications for leadership development in institutions. This study indicates that EI is the "X factor" that distinguishes exceptional physician leaders from those who possess technical skills but lack the ability to coordinate teamwork and emotional labor (Reshetnikov et al., (2020).

Wang et al. (2024) set out to prove this theory by examining the effects of managers' EI on employee performance during the complex economic crisis in Lebanon (Salameh-Ayanian et al., (2025). The results emphasized the importance of "survival" skills in crisis management. The data showed that self-regulation and empathy were the key drivers of employee productivity and resilience (Salameh-Ayanian et al., (2025) In a situation where conventional rewards are scarce, emotionally intelligent managers are the "behavioral anchors" that hold the team together (Salameh-Ayanian et al., (2025). This study puts EI at the forefront as a leadership tool in crisis management, indicating that the capacity to control one's own emotions and understand the struggles of others is what ultimately keeps a team afloat in a time of uncertainty.

Görgens-Ekermans and Roux (2021) also carried out a study on the relationship between EI and transformational leadership (TFL). The study explains how various aspects of EI influence TFL behaviors and, in turn, follower outcomes (Salameh-Ayanian et al., (2025). The study used the Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI) and examined 85 distinct leader-follower pairs. (Görgens-Ekermans, G., & Roux, C. (2021). One of the key findings was that EI aspects, especially self-awareness and self-management, are the basic processes that allow a leader to be transformational. (Görgens-Ekermans, G., & Roux, C. (2021). More specifically, leaders who were seen as self-aware were able to better create a sense of meaning and purpose for their followers, which is a fundamental principle of transformational leadership (Görgens-Ekermans, G., & Roux, C. (2021). This study concludes that emotional intelligence is the key driver that transformational leaders use to connect with the higher-order emotional needs of their followers, thus motivating them to perform and engage through the establishment of resonant and trusting relationships (Görgens-Ekermans, G., & Roux, C. (2021).

Kim et al. (2021) in their study utilized the "achievement approach to leadership emergence," exploring how individual traits relate to social status within a team (Du Plessis et al., (2020). The findings provided a clear causal pathway for leader emergence: high emotional intelligence leads to increased levels of trust among group members, which in turn facilitates the display of task-oriented behaviors, ultimately leading to the perception of the individual as a leader (Du Plessis et al., (2020). The researchers found that trait EI had superior predictive strength over cognitive ability in determining who would occupy a leadership role within the group.

Rupprecht et al. (2019) implemented the Workplace Mindfulness Training (WMT) program. (Tenschert et al., (2025). The results showed that WMT affects the five core capacities, grouped under "Self-Leadership" and "Leadership" (Caporale-Berkowitz et al., (2021). In the area of self-leadership, the participants showed improvement in "Mindful Task Management," which involves the ability to concentrate in a work environment with distractions, and "Self-Care," in which leaders developed an

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understanding of their physical and mental boundaries (Caporale-Berkowitz et al., (2021) This study implies that mindfulness is a special instrument for leaders to attain awareness of their own emotions, which is a necessary condition for successful emotional labor in leadership (Tenschert et al., (2025) By managing their own negative emotions, leaders prevent the spread of negative "emotion contagion" in their organizations, which may bring about a paradigm shift towards a more human-centered or agile organizational culture (Tenschert et al., (2025) Nevertheless, the study also mentioned an unintended consequence of the program: leaders may feel more motivated to pursue their personal values, even if they contradict the classical aims of the organization (Tenschert et al., (2025).

Du Plessis et al. (2020) examined the mediating role of emotional intelligence and job autonomy in the association between transformational leadership and unit-level performance. The study used data from 226 managers and concluded that emotional intelligence and leader-member exchange fully mediated the association between transformational leadership and employee job performance (Punjabi et al., (2025). This indicates that transformational leaders do not rely on mere charisma to attain their performance outcomes but rather on emotional intelligence as an active "influencing strategy" to establish high-quality, mutual social exchanges with their followers (Sasere & Matashu (2025).

The study also emphasized the role of contextual factors, namely job autonomy. In contexts where employees enjoy greater autonomy, the leader's emotional intelligence plays an even more significant role, as it ensures the emotional security required for employees to participate in "job crafting," the proactive redefinition of tasks to better fit their personal values and organizational objectives (Punjabi et al., (2025). This study underlines that for organizations operating in complex sectors such as finance, EI is not merely a personal trait but a "primary mechanism" employed by leaders to develop resilient teams capable of maintaining high performance levels during periods of organizational change (Truninger et al., (2018).

Zhao et al. (2019) s studied the relationship between empathetic leadership and innovative behavior of employees, with Career Construction Theory as the theoretical framework (Stoller, J. K. (2020). The study proposed that empathetic leaders enhance the "career adaptability" of their followers, which is a set of resources such as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, that makes creative risk-taking possible (Stoller, J. K. (2020). The results showed a strong positive correlation between empathetic leadership and innovative behavior (Stoller, J. K. (2020). Teams under the supervision of empathetic managers were found to be more innovative, as the emotional support of the leader enabled employees to confess their mistakes and go beyond their limits without fear of punishment.

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Emotional Intelligence

The notion of Emotional Intelligence became well-known through the research of Salovey and Mayer and was further popularized in leadership and organizational settings by Daniel Goleman. It is generally defined as a collection of emotional and

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social skills that affect how people understand emotions, handle emotional reactions, motivate themselves, empathize with others, and navigate their social interactions. Goleman identifies five key elements of Emotional Intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Self-awareness entails recognizing one's emotional states, strengths, weaknesses, and the effects of emotions on behavior. Self-regulation is about managing emotional responses effectively, especially in stressful or difficult scenarios, promoting constructive behavior rather than impulsive reactions. Motivation represents an individual's intrinsic drive to pursue goals with dedication, optimism, and commitment. Empathy is the ability to understand and appropriately respond to the emotions and viewpoints of others, while social skills include relationship management, influence, communication, and conflict resolution. These elements are interconnected and together shape effective leadership behavior. Emotional Intelligence is seen not as a static trait but as a set of abilities that can be developed through learning, practice, and reflection.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Effectiveness

An increasing number of studies reveal a strong connection between Emotional Intelligence and leadership effectiveness. Leaders with high Emotional Intelligence are better equipped to make well-rounded decisions, especially in situations involving interpersonal disputes or ethical challenges. By identifying emotional signals and managing their reactions, these leaders can avoid hasty decision-making and exhibit enhanced judgment and fairness.

Moreover, Emotional Intelligence significantly impacts team dynamics. Leaders who possess high levels of Emotional Intelligence promote open communication, trust, and mutual respect within their teams. They are more effective at motivating employees, giving constructive feedback, and managing workforce diversity. Consequently, teams led by emotionally intelligent leaders often show increased engagement, collaboration, and improved performance. Additionally, Emotional Intelligence aids in leadership adaptability and innovation. Emotionally aware leaders are more open to feedback, eager to learn, and better prepared to handle change. Unlike leadership models that focus solely on tasks, EI-based leadership prioritizes human-centered methods that align organizational objectives with employee wellness.

3. The Discrepancy Between Understanding and Application in Emotional Intelligence

Although there is significant research emphasizing the value of Emotional Intelligence (EI), many leaders struggle to apply their EI knowledge in their leadership practices consistently. This difference between understanding EI concepts and applying them effectively is known as the knowledge–practice gap.

3.1 Understanding the Knowledge–Practice Gap

This gap emerges when leaders grasp the principles of EI but do not demonstrate them in real-life scenarios. For instance, a leader might understand the significance of empathy but react defensively during a disagreement with an employee. Likewise,

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leaders may appreciate the need for emotional regulation yet find it challenging to stay calm during stressful times within the organization.

Emotional Intelligence requires fundamental behavioral change that often occurs at an unconscious level. Emotional reactions are influenced by enduring habits, personality traits, organizational values, and cultural norms. Therefore, simply learning about EI in theory does not guarantee that one will exhibit emotionally intelligent behaviors.

3.2 Causes of the Gap

Several factors contribute to the continuation of the knowledge–practice gap. Among the most notable obstacles are stress and cognitive overload. Under pressure, leaders tend to fall back on their established habits instead of applying EI skills consciously. Furthermore, leadership styles that have been developed over many years may resist change.

Another significant issue is the insufficient feedback regarding emotional behaviors. While leaders often receive evaluations based on task completion and results, they seldom get input on how their emotional expressions and interpersonal interactions impact others. Additionally, organizational cultures that focus on immediate outcomes instead of relational skills may hinder the development of emotionally intelligent behavior.

To effectively bridge the knowledge–practice gap, training programs should prioritize experiential learning, ongoing reflection, and continual feedback rather than relying solely on one-time theoretical instruction.

4. Effective Approaches to Emotional Intelligence Training

4.1 Experiential Learning and Skill Practice

Experiential learning is crucial for successful Emotional Intelligence (EI) training. Techniques like role-playing, simulations, and scenario-based exercises allow leaders to practice EI skills within realistic situations. These methods create engaging learning experiences that replicate workplace challenges, enabling leaders to try out new behaviors and receive immediate feedback.

Through experiential learning, leaders become more conscious of their emotional triggers and habitual reactions, which is an essential initial step for behavior change. Experiential executive coaching is recognized as an effective method for developing Emotional Intelligence. This coaching provides personalized support, allowing leaders to examine their emotional patterns, leadership challenges, and interpersonal relationships in a confidential environment. Coaches facilitate goal-setting, EI skill practice, and reflection on progress over time.

4.2. Coaching and Feedback mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms, particularly 360-degree feedback, enhance coaching by offering leaders insights into how their emotional behavior is perceived by colleagues at all

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levels. Such feedback fosters self-awareness and reveals areas for growth that may not be clear through self-reflection.

4.3 Mindfulness and Reflective Practices

Mindfulness-based approaches have become increasingly popular in EI training due to their effectiveness in improving self-awareness and emotional regulation. Mindfulness practices encourage leaders to observe their thoughts and feelings without immediate judgment or reaction, allowing for thoughtful responses instead of impulsive reactions.

Reflective practices such as journaling, guided reflection, and discussions with peers further support emotional learning. These reflective activities help leaders assimilate their experiences, identify recurring patterns, and consciously strengthen emotionally intelligent behaviors.

4.4 Contextual and Organizational Integration

Effective EI training must align with the organization's values, leadership competencies, and strategic goals. Integrating EI development within larger leadership frameworks and performance systems enhances its legitimacy and relevance. This contextualized approach ensures that EI training addresses actual challenges faced by the organization instead of focusing solely on abstract concepts.

5. Indian Case Studies: Application of Emotional Intelligence Training

5.1 Emotional Intelligence Training in a Public Sector Organization in India

A prominent public sector organization in India's infrastructure and energy field incorporated Emotional Intelligence (EI) training into its mid-level leadership development program. This organization was grappling with issues like hierarchical communication barriers, resistance to change, and insufficient collaboration across departments. The EI training aimed to enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy through structured reflection sessions. Participants received 360-degree feedback assessments before and after the training. Evaluations after the program revealed significant enhancements in leaders' capabilities to handle emotionally charged situations, especially during performance reviews and inter-department negotiations. Managers became more receptive to feedback, exhibited less reactive behavior during stressful situations, and saw improvements in team morale. Employee engagement surveys conducted six months later indicated increased trust in leadership and better inter-departmental communication.

5.2 Developing Emotional Intelligence in Corporate Leadership in India

A prominent Indian IT services firm incorporated EI training modules into its leadership development framework for project managers and team leaders managing global client operations. In a high-pressure, cross-cultural work environment, these leaders needed to balance technical skills with emotional and interpersonal competencies. The training blended virtual learning modules, mindfulness practices, executive coaching, and peer learning circles. Leaders were educated on identifying emotional triggers, communicating empathically with diverse teams, and managing

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stress during crucial project phases. Outcomes revealed enhanced client satisfaction scores, decreased employee turnover, and improved collaboration among virtual teams. Leaders expressed increased confidence in managing conflicts, giving constructive feedback, and aiding employee wellness.

5.3 Emotional Intelligence Training for Leadership in Higher Education

In the realm of Indian higher education, a state-funded university rolled out EI training for academic administrators, including department heads and college principals. The institution confronted challenges such as faculty resistance, student complaints, and administrative pressures. The training focused on developing emotional self-awareness, empathetic leadership, and resolving conflicts within academic contexts. Real university scenarios, such as faculty appraisal disputes and student discipline matters, were used for case discussions. The program integrated reflective journaling and peer feedback to foster ongoing learning. Following the training, academic leaders showed improved conflict management skills, heightened sensitivity to faculty and student needs, and more collaborative decision-making. Feedback from the institution indicated fewer escalated grievances and an overall enhancement in campus atmosphere.

5.4 EI Training for School Leaders and Teacher Educators

An EI-centered leadership program was launched in select private and aided schools in South India to bolster the emotional skills of principals and senior teachers. This initiative aimed to tackle issues such as teacher burnout, student behavioral problems, and parent-school conflicts. The program featured emotional literacy workshops, mindfulness-based stress reduction methods, and coaching sessions emphasizing empathetic leadership. School leaders were encouraged to exemplify emotionally intelligent behavior and nurture supportive school environments. Results included heightened teacher engagement, a more positive classroom climate, and improved parent satisfaction. Principals reported increased confidence in handling emotionally sensitive matters involving students and staff.

5.5 Summary of Indian Case Study Findings

The Indian case studies reveal the successful application of EI training across various organizational and educational contexts. When culturally relevant, practice-oriented, and supported by reflection and feedback, EI training can effectively bridge knowledge and practical application, fostering trust, collaboration, and overall well-being within organizations.

6. Policy Alignment: Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Development, and NEP 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly focuses on comprehensive development, ethical leadership, emotional well-being, and the fostering of 21st-century skills (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], Government of India, 2020). While the term "Emotional Intelligence" is not explicitly mentioned, the policy's vision and recommendations resonate deeply with the fundamental tenets of EI-based leadership development.

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NEP 2020 highlights the necessity of cultivating cognitive, social, ethical, and emotional skills throughout all educational levels (MHRD, Government of India, 2020). It stresses values such as empathy, diversity, respect, collaboration, communication skills, and emotional stability—key competencies that underlie Emotional Intelligence. The policy advocates for a transformation of roles for educational leaders, administrators, and teachers beyond conventional administrative functions. Additionally, it points to the essentiality of continuous professional development (CPD) for educators and leaders, promoting training that encompasses not only subject expertise but also mentoring abilities, emotional wellness, and leadership skills (MHRD, Government of India, 2020). EI training programs focusing on self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness are vital in equipping leaders to implement institutional changes, address stakeholder issues, and promote inclusive learning environments.

In the context of higher education, NEP 2020 encourages institutional autonomy, multidisciplinary governance, and outcome-driven education (MHRD, Government of India, 2020). These changes necessitate emotionally intelligent leadership capable of overcoming resistance, managing diverse academic populations, and fostering consensus. EI training prepares academic leaders to navigate conflicts, engage meaningfully with faculty, and guide reform efforts with sensitivity and clarity.

From an organizational and governance angle, NEP 2020 aligns with broader Indian policy objectives that focus on enhancing leadership capabilities, ethical governance, and human-centered administration. Emotional Intelligence training enhances these aims by improving the quality of decision-making, transparency, and trust within institutions.

By explicitly connecting EI training initiatives to the objectives of NEP 2020, educational institutions and leadership development programs can better match funding, policy relevance, and institutional legitimacy (MHRD, Government of India, 2020). This alignment reinforces the argument for incorporating Emotional Intelligence as a fundamental aspect of leadership development frameworks across education, public administration, and the corporate sector in India.

7. Best Practices for Emotional Intelligence Training

Successful Emotional Intelligence training programs often incorporate best practices such as tailored content to specific contexts, blended learning methods, ongoing reinforcement, and systematic evaluation through behavioral indicators and multi-source feedback. Leadership backing and organizational commitment are crucial for the long-term sustainability of EI development.

8. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its advantages, EI training encounters obstacles such as resistance to change, skepticism regarding soft skills, and challenges in measuring the return on investment. The personalized nature of Emotional Intelligence development complicates standardized outcomes, necessitating a balanced evaluation approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative measures.

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Conclusion

Emotional Intelligence training is essential for bridging the gap between theory and practice in leadership development. By prioritizing experiential learning, coaching, mindfulness, and reflective practice, leaders can integrate EI competencies and apply them effectively in practical situations. Continuous engagement, feedback, and organizational alignment are critical for impactful and enduring leadership development. As leadership challenges evolve, Emotional Intelligence will continue to be fundamental to ethical, effective, and human-centered leadership.

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