

Linking Emotional Intelligence to Transformational Leadership: Implications for the Indian IT-BPO Industry

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ABSTRACT

The Indian IT-BPO sector contributes to the country's GDP and employs substantial professionals, making it a cornerstone of economic growth (NASSCOM, 2023). Despite its success, the sector faces persistent challenges such as high attrition, stress, and weak work-life balance. Therefore, it demands effective leadership, with Emotional Intelligence (EI) emerging as a pivotal factor in shaping Transformational Leadership (TL). This conceptual paper synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical literature to develop a proposed model linking emotional intelligence with transformational leadership. The paper further proposes testable hypotheses to guide future empirical research within the Indian IT-BPO context. Illustrating from reviewed research studies, the study proposes that leaders' emotional intelligence positively influences transformational leadership, with specific EI competencies and trait-based EI exerting stronger effects, particularly in high-stress IT-BPO environments. The proposed model shows the paths linking EI and TL, highlighting the moderating effect of work stress and the stronger impact of Trait-based EI than Ability-based EI on TL.

"There's no scientific answer to the most difficult problems that leaders face, and those problems are not amenable to solutions sought through the application of rational analytic techniques".

Denhardt and Denhardt, 2006

INTRODUCTION

EI & TL: conjoint concepts

In simple words, EI is the capacity, skill, and ability to manage one's emotions and the emotions of other people. Research in the area suggests that if one can connect emotionally to more people, one can become a more successful professional in any field of work. Further, connecting emotionally is one aspect of achieving success in the work domain; the other critical aspect is leading/influencing. In today's organization, people continuously interact; no one works in isolation. There exist groups, teams, cliques, etc. Leadership has become a core activity that determines the success or failure of any organization (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Dhiman, 2023; Hyder, 2023; Sayyadi, 2019; Shafie et al., 2013; Yukl, 2012). Research has also shown that transformational leadership style is one of the most effective styles of leadership (Burns, 1978, & Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Networking and cultivating relationships are critical leadership skills, as are the abilities to create rapport and engage others emotionally. As per Goleman (2006), "The best bosses are people who are trustworthy, emphatic, and connected, who make us feel calm, appreciated, and inspired". A comparison of exemplary and mediocre leaders competencies found that "distinguish the best from the worst in human services have little or nothing to do with technical knowledge or skill" (Newman et al., 2009), and but it has "everything to do with social and emotional intelligence ... What distinguishes leaders ... goes far beyond that knowledge, into interpersonal skills like empathy, conflict resolution, and people development" (Goleman 2006, p. 261).

Thus, we can say that emotional intelligence and transformational leadership go together. The fundamentals of transformational leadership are motivation and idealism. When an individual allures people through resonating

with their values and things they like and desire, one can easily influence them to their own advantage and make themselves popular. This is how a transformational leader sells his ideas and agendas to followers. It is critical to balance one's integrity and capacity to inspire others to become an effective leader.

These soft skills (social skills, empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation), no matter in which order they are applied, form the basis of emotional intelligence of any individual, and this is a skill that is critical in leading and transforming followers. Understanding and regulating emotions creates and sustains a healthy workplace environment (Cherniss and Goleman, 2001). Leadership, on the other hand, means applying emotional information to action and building, inspiring, and motivating followers towards the vision of the organization. "Leading is about using all your senses" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2006). Both go hand in hand and cannot be separated. Fineman (2003) explains that "Organizational procedures and processes are shaped, negotiated, rejected, reformed, fought over, or celebrated because of feelings. Career blossoms or crashes through feelings. Office departments grow, compete, and change around the feelings that frame preference, politics, and ambitions. Organizations change or stagnate because of emotions that energize or freeze people". In this sense, all workplaces are emotional foregrounds where feelings create incidents and incidents create feelings.

Emotions and Emotional Intelligence play an important part in leadership concepts like Team Building and Management by Succession (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013).

Further, the IT-BPO industry is central to India's economic growth, contributing over 7.5% to the GDP and employing more than 5 million professionals (NASSCOM, 2023). In the collectivist society of India, employees of the IT-BPO sector who are young, emotional, and stressed out, inspiring them is only possible through understanding and regulating their emotions. Emotional intelligence (EI) enables transformational leaders in the Indian IT-BPO sector to inspire, motivate, and build trust, which enhances employee engagement and performance (Goleman, 1995; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership, when supported by EI, fosters innovation, adaptability, and long-term retention, addressing the sector's critical challenge of high attrition rates (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015). Therefore, the present study is a conceptual paper that integrates and synthesizes existing literature to construct a conceptual framework and propose testable hypotheses examining the association between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership within the Indian IT-BPO sector.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Scope & importance of emotions in Transformational Leadership

According to Goleman (1998), emotions and leadership are interlinked and intertwined. Key competencies and skills required for EI and TL are the same. "Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills" are the key ingredients of emotional intelligence.

Emotions play an important role in leadership, especially transformational leadership. Emotional competency is predominantly fundamental to transformational leadership, a concept whose crux is to energize people through the intensity of their own passions and make them do their job more effectively (Goleman, 1998). Transformational leaders resonate with people's understanding of purpose and value, which increases effectiveness as work becomes a kind of moral statement (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Such a leader is most effective in changing times, as arousing people's emotions and connecting them with the future goals of the organization gives a leader a powerful force for change, mobilizing people for organizational transformation (Cherniss, 2010). This kind of leadership brings greater effort and high performance. Transformational leaders make people work more effectively as they are intellectually and emotionally stimulating while articulating their vision; such leaders do not order or direct, they inspire (Bass & Riggio, 2006). A leader's emotional competence determines whether the organization harnesses or loses the fullest potential of its workforce. The emotional tone set by the leader ripples downward in an organization, thereby reaching successive levels, and such organizations can develop and maintain strong cultures (Goleman, 1998). No follower wants to be identified as aggressive and impulsive if the boss is known for his calmness. Interpersonal incompetence in a leader lowers his/her team's productivity: it wastes time, builds bitterness, reduces drive and dedication, and creates aggression and indifference (Cherniss, 2010). The criticality of EI is greater as one moves up in the managerial hierarchy in the organizational structure; leaders at higher levels need to motivate larger groups, and striking emotional

connectivity with more and more people results in building more followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In today's virtual organizations, almost everyone is required to play the role of a leader at one time or another. Such demand to be a leader in times of need requires two emotional competencies: self-confidence and initiative (Goleman, 1998).

Emotional Intelligence and Transformational Leadership: linkage

Effective leaders have provided directions to their teams in varied fashion. Some are quiet and analytical, others are charismatic and intuitive. Leadership is situational nowadays, and no leader follows a single style in the current age of globalization. Still, Goleman (1998) has found that there lie similarities in differences; in other words, all effective leaders are similar in one skill set, that is, they possess high EI.

Emotional intelligence components are positively associated with transformational leadership (Polychroniou, 2009). A transformational leader often requires creating idealized influence on followers; a self-aware transformational leader would exhibit those behaviors and attributes that he wants in return from his followers. In this way, he can lead the team in the desired direction. Also, a transformational leader who is in control of his feelings and impulses can create a culture of trust and fairmindedness, which in turn helps in influencing the behavior of followers.

Further, a self-motivated leader would only be able to motivate their followers. Setting up challenging goals and driving them to achieve the same, not for the sake of external rewards, is possible only if the leader empathetically sets the goals and is clearly able to communicate the same by controlling his impulses in difficult times. It is easy to see how the drive to achieve fosters strong leadership. When you set high performance standards for yourself, you are likely to set them for your organization as well once you are in a leadership role. Leaders, whether following a transformational style or others, need excellent collaboration skills. Friendliness with a purpose will move people in the direction the leader desires. Social skills and empathy are the key leadership capabilities. An incapacity to behave empathetically is equal to not having empathy at all. Similarly, ineffective communication can render the intense motivation and passion of a leader unusable. Interpersonal skills permit leaders to put their emotional intelligence to use.

Despite varied opinions on trait versus ability-based measures of EI, it is still popular, especially in the leadership domain. Emotional abilities not only determine successful operations and leadership in primate groups (Boehm, 1999) but are also linked in human operations. Several scholars have provided theoretical reasons for linking EI with effective leadership, particularly transformational leadership (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005). For communicating compelling vision, motivating, for bringing commitments and elevating the moral standard of behaviours, EI competencies are considered an essential skill (Goleman et al., 2002; George, 2000; Brown et al., 2006). Further, Sosik and Megarian (1999) identified several ways EI might directly back transformational leadership. First, through exercising empathy, leaders' considerations for their followers become genuine. Second, a leader's expertise in tackling emotions effectively can stimulate positive feelings and give followers the confidence to share and develop new ideas. Third, leaders with self-awareness have a stronger awareness of purpose and meaning. Lastly, leaders who are experts in managing their emotions are likely to prioritize the needs of their team more than their own.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Extensive research has been done to identify and analyze the relationship between EI and TL. Some of the related studies are as follows: Harms and Crede (2010) looked at whether emotional intelligence is strongly linked to transformational and other types of leadership. Using data from 62 different samples, they found a fairly strong connection (validity of 0.59) when the same people—whether leaders themselves, their subordinates, peers, or superiors—rated both emotional intelligence and leadership behaviors. Meta-analyses were performed, which showed a moderate relationship between EI and TL; however, this study leaves open the probable role of EI in TL. The results of a study on 267 Greek managers provided support for the model, that managers' EQ competencies, such as social skills, motivation, and empathy, enhance leaders' effectiveness with subordinates (Polychroniou, 2009). This happens because Transformational leaders rub their own passion for ideas and goals on others and energize them. This enhances the subordinates' intensity of effort that he/she put into the work.

This way, leaders make their team members go beyond what is expected. These leaders have a strong emotional influence on their subordinates.

Brown and Moshavi (2005) point out that EI provides a detailed explanation of how interpersonal influence and leadership work. EI is seen as a possible “X” factor that reinvigorates a more complete understanding of social influence and leadership. Brown and Moshavi (2005) pointed out three possibilities:

- a) EI could be an antecedent of transformational leadership. The reason for the assumption is that highly emotionally intelligent individuals are well aware of emotional states and social settings.
- b) EI is a moderator between transformational leadership and various individual, group, and organizational outcomes.
- c) EI may be independent of TL. Here, EI could directly be associated with desired outcomes.

Further, Kupers and Weibler (2006) investigated the significance of emotions in TL. For this purpose, a comparison was made between MLQ and a framework in EI. The results showed that emotions like pride, optimism, and enthusiasm are explicitly considered in MLQ, while emotions like compelling vision, respect, trust, power, confidence, curiosity, and creativity are implicitly present in MLQ. Further, by comparing a framework of emotional competencies with components of transformational leadership, it was found that emotions and emotional intelligence were covered partly by chance. It was suggested that knowledge of “feelings” like fear, joy, happiness, anger, and anxiety would help researchers holistically understand the quality of TL. The study suggested reassessing the role of emotions elaborately and comprehensively in the discussion on TL. Lewis (2000) conducted laboratory research with 368 participants to find out how followers react to the negative emotional demonstration of male and female leaders. The results show that the emotional tone of a CEO influences the perception of leader effectiveness amongst followers. In addition, it was found that emotional tone, together with gender, plays an important role in how a leader’s effectiveness is judged. Further, the study also analysed the effect of a leader’s emotional expression on followers. Expression of anger by the leader motivates followers to work hard, and expression of sadness may result in no effort for improvement. Contrary to these findings, when female leaders expressed their anger or sadness, they were judged less effective by the followers (Lewis, 2000) compared to when they expressed no emotions. The same study also reported contrary results for male leaders. Furthermore, Barbuto and Burbach (2006) found that leaders’ emotional intelligence is closely related to both how they see themselves and how others perceive their transformational leadership. They also reported a positive association between components of EI and TL. Additionally, the predictive relationship between EI and TL was also analyzed. Mandell and Pherwani (2003) researched a sample of 32 managers. The results of t-tests and hierarchical regression analysis showed that there exists a significant relationship between transformational leadership style and emotional intelligence. By taking EI as a predictor and TL as a criterion variable, it was found that EI is a significant predictor of transformational leadership. Additionally, males’ and females’ managers’ EI levels were significantly different, contrary to transformational leadership scores. Cavallo’s (2001) research at Johnson & Johnson Consumer & Personal Care Group, through a 183 multi-rater questionnaire survey, along with ECI (emotional competence inventory) and SOL (standards of leadership). The objective of the study was to determine whether we can distinguish high-performing managers from average-performing managers based on specific competencies. In this extensive research, more than 1,400 employees took part across various regions. The results showed that high-performing managers scored high on self-awareness, self-management, and social skills—all constituting EI—as compared to low-performing managers. It was also found that technical (intellectual) skills can easily be learned, but EI skills need a focused approach and more time, as these competencies are developed early in life and become part of one’s self-image. Hoffman and Frost (2006), while testing the multiple intelligences framework, Bass (2001) found a significant association between “cognitive intelligence components and intellectual stimulation, social intelligence components and charisma, and emotional intelligence components and individualized consideration”.

Emotional Intelligence and Transformational Leadership in Indian IT-BPO Companies

The IT-BPO sector is a cornerstone of India’s economy. According to NASSCOM (2023), the Indian technology industry contributes over 7.5% of the country’s GDP and employs more than 5 million professionals, making it one of the largest private-sector employers. The sector also generates substantial foreign exchange earnings

through exports of IT services and outsourcing solutions, positioning India as a global hub for technology and business process management. Furthermore, the IT-BPO industry has created opportunities for upward mobility among young professionals and significantly influenced urban development, especially in Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has a pivotal part in shaping transformational leadership (TL), especially in people-centric and high-pressure industries like the Indian IT-BPO sector. Transformational leaders thrive on their ability to inspire, motivate, and influence employees by appealing to higher values and creating a shared vision. EI enables leaders to remain self-aware, manage their emotions, empathize with others, and build strong interpersonal relationships, all of which are essential to the four dimensions of TL—"idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration" (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the IT-BPO sector, where employees face demanding deadlines, long shifts, and high attrition, leaders with strong EI are better equipped to handle stress, reduce burnout, and maintain positive team morale (Cherniss, 2010). For instance, emotionally intelligent leaders can manage conflict, display empathy toward employees' challenges, and foster a sense of belonging in virtual or hybrid teams—a growing reality in this industry. By doing so, they not only increase job satisfaction but also strengthen employee commitment and reduce turnover, which remains one of the most pressing issues in the sector (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015). Transformational leadership grounded in EI has further importance because it encourages innovation and adaptability—two qualities critical to an industry driven by rapid technological change and global client demands. Leaders who can connect emotionally with employees are more successful in aligning individual aspirations with organizational goals, thereby mobilizing people to deliver beyond expectations (Goleman, 1998; Sosik & Megarian, 1999).

In this context, both EI and TL are not only leadership imperatives but also strategic necessities for sustaining competitiveness, reducing attrition, and enhancing employee engagement in Indian IT-BPO companies. Leaders who combine transformational leadership skills with high emotional intelligence can better navigate the complex, multicultural, and high-pressure environment of the sector, thereby ensuring its continued contribution to India's economic growth.

Proposed Hypotheses

In the Indian IT-BPO sector, which contributes significantly to national GDP and employment, leadership effectiveness is crucial for sustaining productivity and managing high attrition rates (NASSCOM, 2023). Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical determinant of Transformational Leadership (TL), as leaders with high EI can regulate emotions, empathize with employees, and foster a positive work climate (Goleman, 1998; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership behaviors—such as inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation—are strongly linked to emotionally intelligent capabilities. For instance, leaders who exhibit empathy and self-awareness are more successful in aligning employee goals with organizational objectives, thereby enhancing engagement and reducing turnover (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2015). Given the high-stress nature of IT-BPO roles, EI-driven TL can be particularly effective in improving resilience, creativity, and organizational commitment. Thus, exploring the relationship between EI and TL in this sector is vital for both theory and practice. Empirical testing can provide actionable insights into how organizations may invest in leadership development and EI training to improve long-term sustainability. Possible proposed Hypotheses to be tested and investigated concerning EI and TL in the IT-BPO sector of India are:

H1: In the Indian IT-BPO sector, leaders' emotional intelligence is positively associated with transformational leadership behaviors, which are critical for managing high employee turnover, diverse teams, and fast-paced client demands (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; Polychroniou, 2009).

H2: In the Indian IT-BPO sector, specific EI competencies (e.g., empathy, motivation, social skills) significantly predict transformational leadership dimensions such as idealized influence and individualized consideration, enabling leaders to foster employee engagement and reduce attrition (Polychroniou, 2009; Barbuto & Burbach, 2006).

H3: In the Indian IT-BPO sector, trait measures of EI demonstrate a stronger predictive relationship with transformational leadership than ability-based measures of EI, as enduring personality-linked competencies may better equip leaders to handle stress, cross-cultural interactions, and customer-centric roles (Harms & Credé, 2010).

H4: The impact of emotional intelligence on transformational leadership is stronger in high-stress environments (e.g., call centers) compared to relatively low-stress IT service roles.

Further, the study also proposes a model to be tested in the context of IT-BPO employees. The proposed model places Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the primary antecedent of Transformational Leadership (TL). EI is theorised as two related constructs — trait-based EI (enduring personality-linked competencies) and ability-based EI (performance on EI tasks). Specific EI competencies such as empathy, intrinsic motivation, and social skills are hypothesized to predict TL dimensions (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration). Further, TL influences organizational outcomes such as employee engagement, lower attrition, and greater resilience. The study also proposed that constructs such as work stress can moderate the relationship between the EI and TL. It may be stronger in high-stress, client-facing settings (e.g., call centers).

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework Linking EI and TL

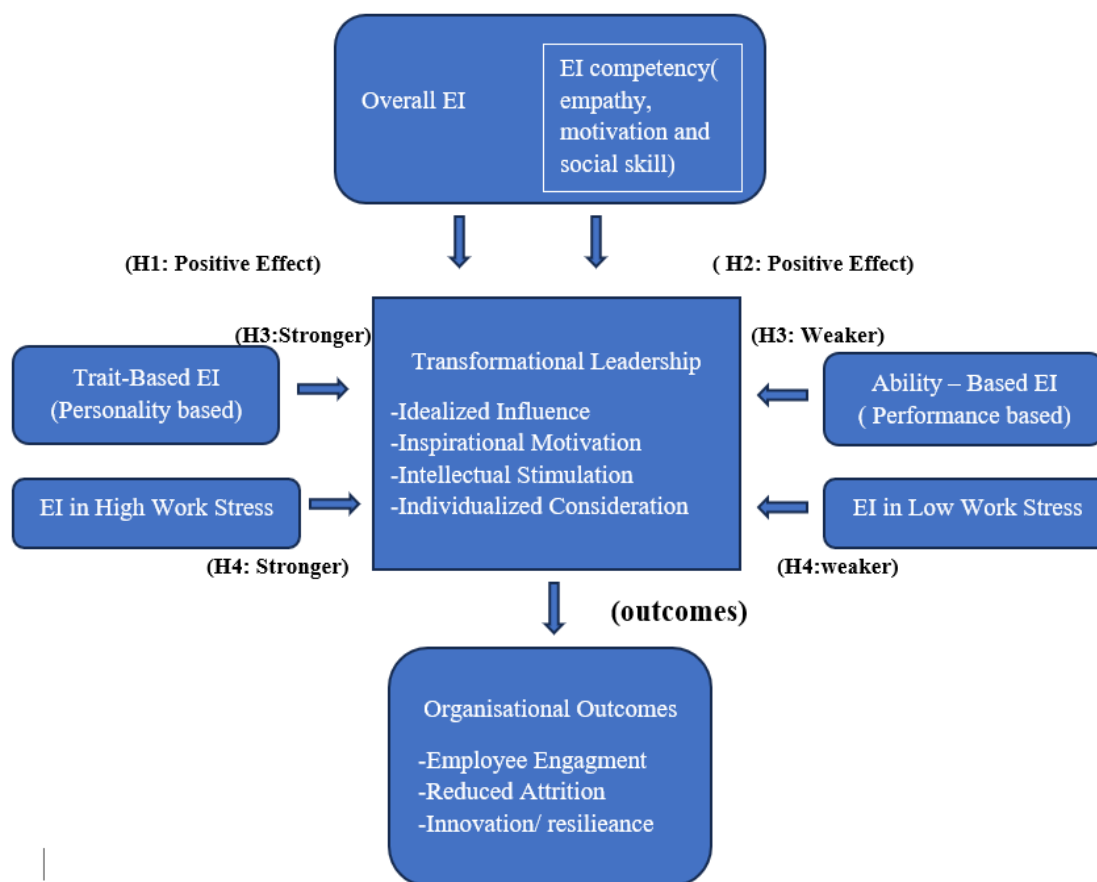


Figure 1 depicts how the hypotheses map onto the model. The proposed hypotheses are depicted through the following paths:

- **H1:** Represented by a direct path connecting Overall EI → TL.
- **H2:** A part for the direct path in which specific EI competencies predict → particular TL dimensions (paths from EI Competency box to specific TL sub-dimensions).
- **H3:** Paralled path depicted showing Trait EI has a stronger path coefficient to TL than ability EI (compare two EI → TL paths).
- **H4:** Work stress moderates EI → TL (interaction effect; stronger slope under high stress).

DISCUSSION

The study presents four hypotheses that could be tested in the IT-BPO industry. It proposes that emotional intelligence and transformational leadership are positively related, and emotional competencies can predict transformational leadership. Secondly, it proposes that the transformational leadership style in the IT BPO companies is more influenced by trait-based EI. Lastly, in high high-stress environment of IT services, transformational leaders are more influenced by emotional intelligence. We will discuss these in detail.

Emotional Intelligence will positively influence transformational leadership style. Self-regulation and empathy, the critical components of emotional Intelligence, are the key facilitators of creating an idealized influence on the followers. On the other hand, an effective transformational leader builds inspirational communication through self-awareness and social skills, which are mandated to be emotionally intelligent. In short, EI makes leaders personally effective, which helps them transform their teams and followers. In other words, the EI competencies can create an effective transformational Leader. The relationship between the two variables will be much deeper in the high turnover Indian IT-BPO industry, as the sector employs emotionally charged individuals who are young and require meaningful mentorship.

In case of H1 and H2 showing positive predictive linkages between EI and TL, the IT-BPO companies should embed leadership training programs with exercises on emotional awareness and regulations. Specifically, Empathy, social skills, and motivations of the leaders could be enhanced through scenario-based and simulation training. These exercises can reproduce high-pressure client communications and diverse team dynamics, letting participants practice and improve their emotional responses in realistic situations (Piton Global, 2023). Emotional regulations are specifically required in the developed IT-BPO sectors where employees work shifts and tight deadlines. Moreover, conflict resolution is more complex as employees often deal with global clients in non-face-to-face situations; therefore, the employees in the sector should be better equipped to learn social skills through active listening or mirroring techniques.

Leadership is often influenced by personality traits, competencies, and abilities. But there has been wider acceptance of the fact that stable personality traits exert a stronger influence on a leader's leadership style (Sieglings, Nielsen, & Petrides, 2014; Zadorozhny & Zadorozhny, 2025). An ability that has been practiced consistently over time can become ingrained in an individual's personality, allowing it to manifest naturally in day-to-day management (Cooper, 2018). When leaders internalize skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, or effective communication through repeated practice, these abilities transition from conscious effort to habitual behavior, enhancing their effectiveness in routine leadership tasks (Petrides, 2009). In this context, the current study proposed that trait-based EI would be a better predictor of transformational leadership. This relationship is particularly pertinent in the IT-BPO context, where leaders repeatedly face high-stress situations, cross-cultural and cross-generational teams, and customer-focused service demands (Ntalakos, Rossidis, & Belias, 2022).

High-stress work situations require a lot of emotional labour and demand higher emotional sensitivity than a low-stress work environment. Similarly, influencing and creating idealized influence in complex and demanding work situations requires exhibiting high emotional sensitivity and competencies towards teams and followers. Conversely, in a low-stressed environment, management can make do with a transactional leadership style, as day-to-day operations are not much emotionally charged.

Concerning the proposed model, the study suggests exploring various paths and linkages between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership by employing strong and multidimensional measurement tools to capture the complex nature of emotional intelligence and leadership outcomes. Trait EI can be measured using standardized self-report inventories such as the TEIQue or Schutte EI Scale (TEIQue; Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Schutte et al., 1998), while ability EI may be more accurately measured through performance-based instruments like the MSCEIT (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). Specific EI competencies, such as empathy, motivation, and social skills, can be examined using subscales. Transformational leadership could be assessed through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (MLQ; Bass & Avolio, 1995) to capture its core sub-dimensions, whereas work stress can be evaluated through well-known stress scales (e.g., Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) or objective indicators like call volume and shift intensity. The study also proposed, through

a step-by-step approach the model could be validated using confirmatory factor analysis, Structural Equation Modeling, and moderation analysis. Future research could employ outcome measures such as turnover intention, employee engagement, and attrition rates for comprehensive analysis.

CONCLUSION

The review establishes that Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Transformational Leadership (TL) are deeply interlinked, particularly in people-driven and high-pressure industries such as the Indian IT-BPO sector. The integration of EI into leadership practice is desirable and essential. The hypotheses proposed in this study underscore the need to empirically examine how EI predicts and enhances TL in this sector. Insights gained from such research can inform leadership development programs and EI training courses to create innovative and emotionally intelligent organizations. Ultimately, nurturing EI-based transformational leadership is essential for sustaining growth, retaining employees, and securing India's continued competitiveness in the global IT-BPO landscape.

Future investigations should thoroughly test these hypotheses using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches across varied IT-BPO organizations in India. For example, surveys employing validated instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), supplemented with interviews or focus groups, could offer robust insights into how EI and TL are linked. Further, Other variables, such as team trust, could be tested for their potential mediation effect that explains how EI translates into TL behaviors.

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