



Leveraging Emotional Intelligence in Public Service Leadership: Managing Low-Performing Subordinates with Social and Political Connections

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ABSTRACT:

Senior and executive leaders in public service organizations frequently have to deal with the dual problem of overseeing underperforming employees who are also protected by powerful social and political ties. These dynamics jeopardize accountability, equity, and the integrity of public institutions in addition to undermining organizational effectiveness. In order to manage these complexities and preserve workplace cohesiveness and performance standards, this study looks at how emotional intelligence (EI) can be strategically used. The study assesses the function of emotional intelligence (EI) in handling delicate workplace dynamics by incorporating insights from leadership theories, current literature, and a few chosen case studies, all of which are based on a qualitative research design. For leaders who must strike a balance between performance management and the realities of political embeddedness and patronage, core emotional intelligence (EI) competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, are positioned as essential tools. Strategies that can help leaders reduce resistance, ease tensions, and promote positive interactions with politically connected subordinates, like empathetic communication, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation, are given special consideration. According to the results, leaders with advanced EI skills are better equipped to manage politically delicate personnel matters in ways that maintain institutional unity while simultaneously encouraging accountability and service provision. Managers can improve team cohesion, uphold the moral underpinnings of public service, and transform potentially disruptive dynamics into opportunities for growth by putting Emotional Intelligence (EI) principles into practice. By placing emotional intelligence (EI) in the unique context of public service leadership, where political and social entanglements are frequently inevitable, this study adds to the expanding conversation on leadership and governance. In order to develop emotionally intelligent leaders who can maintain performance and integrity in the public sector, the study has practical implications for leadership development programs, hiring practices, and organizational reform initiatives.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Public Service Leadership, Employee Performance, Workplace Dynamics, Leadership Development

1. Introduction and Background

Globally, public service organizations are coming under more and more scrutiny for their efficiency, accountability, and leadership ethics. Within the South African context, these challenges are particularly acute due to persistent governance failures, patronage networks, and systemic performance gaps in service delivery (Botha, 2022; AGSA, 2023). The existence of workers who routinely perform below expectations but are protected by close social and political ties to senior or executive managers is a persistent challenge in these settings. Because decisions are influenced by interpersonal and political dynamics in addition to organizational policy, these relationships create a complex environment in which traditional performance management techniques are frequently ineffective. Emotional intelligence (EI), broadly defined as the ability to recognise, understand, regulate, and influence emotions in oneself and others, has become an important framework for addressing such leadership challenges (Miao et al., 2020). Leaders with high EI demonstrate enhanced interpersonal awareness, improved conflict management, and greater resilience in high-pressure environments (Cherniss, 2021). In public service organisations, where accountability structures are intertwined with political authority, EI provides a potential pathway for leaders to manage delicate personnel issues while safeguarding institutional integrity. The importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in leadership has been widely recognized. According to recent research, it can improve relationships between leaders and subordinates, encourage teamwork, and facilitate productive resolution of conflicts at work (Clarke, 2022; Rahman et al., 2023). Crucially, leaders with strong EI competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, are better equipped to deal with uncertain and power-asymmetrical environments (Goleman, 2019; George & Dane, 2021). Emotional intelligence (EI) has received a lot of attention in leadership literature, but its application in situations where underperforming staff members have political or social connections to executive leadership has received little empirical investigation. This disparity is especially noticeable in the public sector, where political patronage frequently erodes organizational accountability and performance management (Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021).

The presence of politically connected employees presents unique leadership dilemmas. On the one hand, addressing performance shortfalls is essential for efficiency and service delivery. On the other, the personal or political connections of such employees may deter direct interventions, as leaders risk conflict with influential stakeholders or the perception of organisational discord (Maseko, 2022). This often results in tolerance of underperformance, which further entrenches a culture of impunity and compromises service outcomes. By applying EI, leaders can adopt more nuanced strategies that reduce conflict, preserve workplace harmony, and ensure that accountability is maintained without escalating political tensions. Research suggests that emotionally intelligent leaders employ strategies such as empathetic communication, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation to manage difficult employees constructively (Humphrey, 2022). For instance, instead of adopting punitive approaches that may provoke resistance or political backlash, leaders with high EI might engage underperforming employees in dialogue that acknowledges their personal circumstances while still emphasising organisational goals and performance standards (Rahman et al., 2023). Moreover, EI competencies allow leaders to read subtle cues in workplace interactions, anticipate resistance, and respond in ways that minimise hostility and encourage cooperation (Clarke, 2022).

In the South African public service, where political allegiance and hierarchical authority frequently collide, Emotional Intelligence (EI) also helps leaders to present performance management as a process of development rather than punishment. This can turn a potentially upsetting situation into a chance for organizational learning and professional development (Botha, 2022). In this sense, Emotional Intelligence (EI) not only fulfils an interpersonal role but also upholds the organizational values of accountability, justice, and service provision. In light of this, the goal of this study is to investigate how emotional intelligence (EI) functions in public service settings when it comes to managing underperforming employees who have strong social and political ties to executive management. By presenting Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a useful tool for managing politically sensitive workplace dynamics, the study fills a gap in the academic literature. In doing so, it contributes to leadership and governance discourse by highlighting how emotional competencies can enhance managerial effectiveness under challenging circumstances.

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How can EI competencies be applied to manage low-performing subordinates with close ties to executive management?
2. What strategies can leaders employ to address performance issues without disrupting workplace harmony?
3. What are the implications of applying EI in such contexts for leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes?

By answering these questions, the study offers information that is pertinent to public sector organizational reforms, recruitment tactics, and leadership development programs. More generally, it emphasizes how crucial emotionally intelligent leadership is to enhancing service delivery, bolstering institutional integrity, and lessening the detrimental impacts of political patronage in government agencies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature on emotional intelligence (EI) in leadership has expanded significantly in the past two decades, with studies consistently showing its importance in shaping managerial effectiveness, decision-making, and employee outcomes (Miao et al., 2020; Clarke, 2022). Within the public sector, EI is increasingly recognised as a leadership competency capable of strengthening accountability, managing conflict, and fostering collaborative cultures (Humphrey, 2022; Rahman et al., 2023). Yet, despite its prominence, a notable gap persists in scholarship concerning the application of EI in situations where leaders must manage low-performing subordinates who are shielded by social and political ties to executive management. This phenomenon is particularly visible in South Africa and across parts of Africa, where political patronage and entrenched social networks frequently undermine formal performance management systems (Maseko, 2022; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021). This section reviews the global, continental, and South African literature on EI and leadership, highlighting both supporting and critical perspectives. It draws attention to the theoretical foundations of EI, its documented benefits, its contested limitations, and its relevance in public administration. The review also explores how EI can be applied in politically sensitive organisational contexts, ultimately positioning the present study to address gaps in knowledge and practice.

2.2 Conceptualising Emotional Intelligence in Leadership

Since the groundbreaking research of Salovey and Mayer (1990) and its subsequent popularization by Goleman (1998), the conceptualization of emotional intelligence (EI) has undergone significant change. Emotional intelligence (EI) was first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and control emotions in both oneself and others, emphasizing its function in directing behaviour and thought. This framework was developed into a leadership-oriented model by Goleman (1998), who identified five essential competencies: motivation, self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and social skills. According to Goleman, these skills set great leaders apart by empowering them to control their own emotions as well as those of others, which promotes cohesive teamwork, efficient decision-making, and conflict resolution. While Goleman's model is widely applied in organisational research and practice, including in public sector leadership studies, it has attracted criticism for lacking psychometric precision and for conflating personality traits with skill-based competencies (Joseph et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the model remains particularly valuable in public service leadership contexts, where relational and political dynamics are highly salient. From a researchers' perspective, despite its limitations, Goleman's framework provides a practical lens through which leaders' emotional competencies can be systematically assessed and developed, particularly when addressing complex interpersonal and politically sensitive challenges (Filice & Weese, 2024; Clarke, 2022).

The importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in effective leadership is further supported by empirical research. Supramaniam and Singaravelloo (2021) showed that Emotional Intelligence (EI) enhances employee engagement, teamwork, and overall service delivery, all of which have a positive impact on organizational performance in Malaysia's public sector. Similar findings were made by Filice and Weese (2024), who noted that EI improves Canadian public administrators' resilience and adaptive decision-making in times of crisis, highlighting its applicability in demanding and unpredictable situations. From the perspective of a researchers, these results show that emotional intelligence (EI) is a strategic capability that directly enhances organizational effectiveness rather than just being a "soft skill. However, the researchers argues that EI's utility in politically complex settings is more nuanced. In contexts where low-performing employees are protected due to social or political connections, EI must go beyond fostering interpersonal harmony to include strategic emotional regulation that maintains accountability without provoking conflict or resistance. Leaders must balance empathy and social skills with assertiveness and self-regulation to navigate institutional politics effectively (George & Dane, 2021; Clarke, 2022). The researchers contends that this dual requirement positions EI as both a relational and strategic tool, enabling leaders to manage sensitive personnel issues while safeguarding organisational integrity.

Public service organizations in South Africa offer compelling illustrations of these dynamics. Service delivery may be jeopardized by the conflicts that municipalities and provincial departments frequently face between political loyalty and performance accountability (Botha, 2022; AGSA, 2023). The researchers contends that managers who incorporate emotional intelligence (EI) into their management style are in a better position to reduce these conflicts and guarantee that performance interventions are equitable and successful. In addition to preserving team unity and shielding the organization from social or political meddling, emotional competencies like empathy, situational awareness, and resilience enable leaders to constructively address performance gaps (Maseko, 2022; Humphrey, 2022). In conclusion, the researchers posits that EI represents a multifaceted competency essential for public service leadership, particularly in politically and socially complex environments. While Goleman's model provides a practical framework for understanding and developing EI, its application must consider contextual realities, including institutional politics, social networks, and organisational pressures. Leaders who effectively apply EI are better equipped to manage performance challenges, foster team cohesion, and enhance organisational outcomes, highlighting the construct's enduring significance for contemporary public service leadership in South Africa, across Africa, and globally.

2.3 EI and Leadership Outcomes: A Global Perspective

Positive leadership outcomes have been consistently associated with emotional intelligence (EI) in a variety of national and organizational contexts. Research from around the world shows that leaders with high EI tend to improve team cohesion, increase employee engagement, and boost organizational performance (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2020). These results demonstrate how Emotional Intelligence (EI) can help leaders effectively manage interpersonal and personal dynamics, creating an atmosphere that encourages cooperation, trust, and performance. According to the researchers, emotional intelligence (EI) is a strategic competency that is more than just a "soft skill"; it is a fundamental factor in determining a leader's effectiveness, especially in complex and politically nuanced environments. In Europe, Van der Voet and Steijn (2021) emphasise that EI is particularly critical for public sector leaders navigating the dual pressures of political responsiveness and administrative accountability. Their research shows that emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to balance citizen expectations with bureaucratic constraints, resulting in more effective service delivery. This underscores the researchers's argument that EI functions not only as a relational skill but also as a tool for strategic leadership, allowing leaders to align organisational objectives with stakeholder demands while maintaining fairness and accountability. Similarly, Humphrey (2022) found that in the United States, EI enhances public leaders' credibility and trustworthiness, particularly in politically divided or polarised environments. The ability to perceive, interpret, and manage emotional dynamics allows leaders to mitigate conflict, facilitate consensus, and navigate sensitive policy decisions effectively. Clarke (2022) further argues that EI strengthens leaders' capacity to manage diversity and inclusion initiatives, an increasingly critical requirement for public sector organisations globally. These findings collectively suggest that emotionally intelligent leadership contributes to both operational efficiency and institutional legitimacy.

These findings are supported by research from Asia. Supramaniam and Singaravelloo (2021) showed how Emotional Intelligence (EI) boosts employee motivation, teamwork, and conflict resolution in Malaysia. Rahman, Hossain, and Khan (2023) also looked at public organizations in Bangladesh and discovered that leaders with high EI successfully implemented cooperative conflict resolution techniques, which decreased workplace conflicts and raised employee satisfaction. As a leadership tool, emotional intelligence (EI) is universal, according to the researchers, but its practical implementation needs to be adjusted for cultural, institutional, and political contexts. In Africa, research illustrates both the opportunities and constraints of EI in public leadership. Studies in Kenya and Ghana reveal that politically connected employees can create performance management challenges, which require leaders to balance relational skills with strategic assertiveness (Acheampong, 2021; Omondi, 2020). In South Africa, Botha (2022) and Maseko (2022) note that public service leaders face similar tensions, where low-performing employees may be protected due to social or political affiliations. The researchers argues that EI provides leaders with tools to navigate these complexities by fostering trust, demonstrating fairness, and exercising emotional regulation to manage politically sensitive performance issues without compromising organisational goals. Leaders who effectively deploy EI competencies, particularly empathy, social skills, and self-regulation, are better equipped to mediate conflicts, sustain team cohesion, and maintain accountability in challenging environments. All things considered, the researchers argues that emotional intelligence (EI) is a relational and strategic capability in public sector leadership. Since emotionally intelligent leaders continuously improve organizational outcomes, whether through increased engagement, conflict resolution, or better service delivery, its global applicability is clear. Nonetheless, the data also shows that leaders' capacity to contextualize the use of EI in light of regional sociopolitical realities, cultural norms, and institutional limitations is essential to its efficacy. Emotional intelligence (EI) must be incorporated into training, hiring, and performance management procedures for public service leadership, especially in politically charged environments, to guarantee that leaders are prepared to successfully negotiate the confluence of structural and interpersonal difficulties.

2.4 African Literature on EI in Leadership

Research on emotional intelligence (EI) within African leadership contexts is growing, yet it remains relatively limited compared to global scholarship. Existing studies emphasise that EI frameworks must be adapted to the unique institutional, cultural, and socio-political realities of African public service organisations. The continent's public sector often operates in environments characterised by political interference, resource constraints, and entrenched patronage systems, which shape both leadership practices and employee behaviour (Acheampong, 2021; Omondi, 2020). From the researchers' perspective, understanding EI in Africa requires not only a focus on interpersonal skills but also recognition of the structural limitations that affect leaders' capacity to enforce accountability. Okpara and Edwin (2021) showed that emotionally intelligent leaders in Nigeria were better at fostering employee commitment and managing organizational change in public sector organizations. Their research showed that emotional intelligence (EI) mitigated the detrimental effects of political meddling in administrative decision-making, indicating that emotionally intelligent leaders can preserve team cohesiveness and act as a buffer against systemic issues. The researchers contend that although emotional intelligence (EI) cannot completely remove political and structural limitations, it does give leaders useful tools to lessen their effects, especially by encouraging employee engagement, motivation, and trust.

The significance of emotional intelligence (EI) in leadership under trying circumstances is also highlighted by Kenyan research. Nyambura (2022) discovered that, despite political meddling and resource scarcity, leaders who used techniques like conflict resolution, constructive criticism, and sympathetic listening were able to increase employee cooperation in local government. These results lend credence to the researchers' contention that emotional intelligence (EI) supports strategic leadership as well as relational management, allowing leaders to handle delicate political situations while maintaining organizational functionality. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to uphold professional standards and resolve possible disputes in situations where poor performance may be accepted because of social or political ties. South African scholarship reflects comparable trends but also highlights the limitations of EI in addressing systemic governance challenges. Botha (2022) emphasised that EI can enhance organisational discipline, accountability, and team cohesion, yet political patronage frequently undermines the extent to which emotionally intelligent leadership practices can be institutionalised. Similarly, Maseko (2022) noted that political interference in South African municipalities often neutralises formal performance management systems, creating a scenario where EI can help leaders manage interpersonal relationships but cannot fully overcome systemic dysfunction. From the researchers' standpoint, these findings suggest that EI should be seen as a complementary leadership resource rather than a panacea for governance challenges. While it enables leaders to manage relationships strategically, broader institutional reforms remain essential to enforce accountability and dismantle patronage structures.

Across Africa, the literature therefore presents a nuanced understanding of EI in leadership: it is both necessary and insufficient. Emotionally intelligent leaders can foster trust, resolve conflicts, and enhance workplace harmony, yet their effectiveness is constrained by structural and political realities. The researchers argue that EI in Africa should be conceptualised as a dual-purpose tool: first, to strengthen relational management and interpersonal effectiveness; and second, to provide a strategic buffer against the challenges posed by political interference and systemic inefficiencies. Such a conceptualisation recognises that leadership in African public service environments requires a sophisticated balance between emotional competencies and political acumen (Acheampong, 2021; Omondi, 2020). Lastly, comparative analysis indicates that African public service leaders work in more politically charged settings than their European or North American counterparts, which highlights the significance of emotional intelligence (EI) in preserving organizational resilience and team cohesion (Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021; Humphrey, 2022). Given the limitations imposed by political structures and resource limitations, the researchers argue that cultivating emotionally intelligent leadership skills in Africa necessitates a context-sensitive approach that incorporates EI training, mentorship, and institutional support mechanisms. Even in difficult political climates, public service organizations can do this to increase employee engagement, strengthen governance outcomes gradually, and improve leadership effectiveness.

2.5 Emotional Intelligence and Low-Performing, Politically Connected Employees

The use of emotional intelligence (EI) in managing underperforming staff members who have ties to the leadership on a social or political level is one of the most understudied topics in EI research. The role of emotional intelligence (EI) in improving team dynamics, conflict resolution, and overall leadership effectiveness has been well documented in the literature (Cherniss, 2021; Humphrey, 2022; Clarke, 2022), but little attention has been paid to how EI works in politically sensitive personnel management. Leaders face a dual challenge of enforcing accountability while preserving organizational harmony and avoiding political ramifications. This omission is especially noticeable in situations where political patronage, cadre deployment, or social networks impact performance outcomes. According to the researchers, this is a significant theoretical and practical gap, especially for South African public service environments and similar African contexts. In South Africa, politically connected employees are a well-documented phenomenon, particularly in municipalities and provincial departments where cadre deployment and patronage appointments are prevalent (Maseko, 2022; Botha, 2022). Auditor-General reports repeatedly highlight cases in which poor performance persists due to weak accountability mechanisms reinforced by political networks (AGSA, 2023). These dynamics create a leadership dilemma: conventional performance management practices may be ineffective or even counterproductive if they provoke political backlash or disrupt workplace cohesion. Consequently, leaders are required to exercise not only managerial authority but also significant emotional and political acumen to navigate these complex environments. The researchers argue that EI provides a critical set of competencies to address these challenges effectively, bridging the gap between relational leadership and strategic enforcement of accountability.

When dealing with poor performance from politically connected subordinates, leaders who possess high levels of self-awareness and emotional regulation are better equipped to control their own emotional reactions. Leaders can approach performance interventions with poise and frame feedback in a constructive rather than punitive manner thanks to this self-management (Humphrey, 2022; George & Dane, 2021). A more nuanced approach to

performance talks that strikes a balance between organizational objectives and individual circumstances is fostered by empathy, which also helps leaders comprehend the pressures and limitations faced by politically connected employees (Rahman et al., 2023). By enabling leaders to engage in negotiations with political stakeholders and present corrective measures as developmental interventions rather than disciplinary actions, social skills help leaders lower the likelihood of political retaliation or workplace conflict (Clarke, 2022; Acheampong, 2021). From the researchers's viewpoint, these EI-based strategies not only facilitate more effective management of low-performing employees but also serve to maintain organisational cohesion in politically charged environments. By deploying EI, leaders can transform potentially adversarial situations into opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and capacity building. For example, integrating active listening, constructive feedback, and collaborative problem-solving allows leaders to address performance gaps without triggering resistance or undermining relationships with politically influential actors. Such practices are essential in South African municipalities, where political connections often complicate conventional hierarchical authority (Maseko, 2022).

This viewpoint is supported by empirical research conducted in Africa and other international settings. Emotionally intelligent leaders in Ghana and Kenya effectively manage conflicts brought on by politically connected subordinates, upholding performance standards and reducing interpersonal hostility (Omondi, 2020; Acheampong, 2021). According to studies conducted in Bangladesh and Malaysia, emotional intelligence (EI) improves leaders' ability to resolve politically or socially sensitive conflicts, encouraging participation and maintaining organizational results even in trying situations (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021; Rahman et al., 2023). The researchers argues that these results together demonstrate the dual role of emotional intelligence (EI), which serves as a relational tool for managing relationships and a strategic tool for negotiating organizational environments that are influenced by politics. Nonetheless, the researchers acknowledges that EI is not a panacea. Structural limitations, entrenched political patronage, and weak accountability systems constrain the effectiveness of even the most emotionally intelligent leaders (Botha, 2022; Maseko, 2022). While EI equips leaders with strategies to manage politically connected subordinates constructively, sustainable improvements in performance require complementary institutional reforms that address governance weaknesses, enhance transparency, and enforce accountability. From this perspective, EI should be conceptualised as a necessary but insufficient tool: it enables leaders to operate effectively within existing constraints but must be complemented by broader organisational and systemic interventions to achieve lasting change. According to the researchers, one of the most important areas for EI research and practice is the management of underperforming, politically connected workers. Emotionally intelligent leadership offers the skills necessary to manage politically delicate situations, preserve organizational unity, and strategically carry out performance interventions in South Africa and other similar African contexts. However, leaders must be able to combine emotional intelligence with institutional knowledge, political awareness, and strategic foresight in order for EI to be effective. In addition to advancing theoretical knowledge of emotional intelligence (EI) in intricate public service contexts, addressing these dynamics offers practical advice for hiring, developing leaders, and formulating policies that will improve the performance and accountability of the public sector.

2.6 Critiques and Limitations of Emotional Intelligence in Leadership

Even though emotional intelligence (EI) is widely accepted as a crucial leadership skill, some academics have criticized its use in organizational settings from a conceptual, methodological, and practical standpoint. The conceptual uniqueness of EI is the subject of one main criticism. Critics contend that the theoretical clarity and empirical precision of emotional intelligence (EI) are called into question due to its significant overlap with other well-established constructs, such as personality traits, cognitive intelligence, and social intelligence (Joseph, Jin, Newman, & O'Boyle, 2015; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2020). Although this criticism is legitimate, in the researchers's opinion, it does not lessen the applicability of EI. Emotional intelligence (EI) operationalizes emotional competencies in ways that are directly actionable in leadership contexts, especially for managing conflict, employee engagement, and interpersonal complexity, even if they overlap with other constructs. Another significant critique concerns the risk of overemphasising EI at the expense of recognising structural and institutional factors influencing leadership outcomes. Botha (2022) and Maseko (2022) note that public sector leaders in South Africa often operate within deeply entrenched political and bureaucratic systems. In such environments, an excessive focus on individual emotional competencies may obscure systemic deficiencies, such as weak accountability mechanisms, political interference, and resource constraints. From a researchers's standpoint, this critique highlights the need for a dual approach: while EI equips leaders to manage relationships and mediate conflicts, its application must be complemented by broader organisational reforms that address structural limitations.

EI's shortcomings are especially noticeable in situations where political patronage is deeply ingrained. Politically connected workers frequently hold positions in South Africa where official accountability procedures are either ignored or ineffective (AGSA, 2023; Maseko, 2022). Underperformance in these situations cannot be adequately addressed by emotionally intelligent leadership alone. In order to preserve workplace harmony and continue performance discussions, leaders can use emotional intelligence (EI) to interact with these workers in a positive way by using techniques like empathy, active listening, and social negotiation. However, the researchers contends that despite leaders' emotional intelligence, performance gaps may continue if systemic changes are not made that increase accountability, encourage transparency, and lessen the impact of patronage. The structural barriers to efficient public service delivery can be lessened, but not completely removed, by EI. Further critiques relate to the measurement and practical implementation of EI in organisational settings. Zeidner et al. (2020) emphasise that EI assessment tools vary widely in reliability and validity, raising questions about their suitability for informing leadership development or recruitment. Some instruments focus on self-reported emotional competencies, which may be biased by social desirability or self-perception, while others employ performance-based measures that are complex and resource-intensive. From the researchers's perspective, these measurement challenges underscore the importance of integrating EI development with practical leadership training, mentorship, and context-sensitive evaluation rather than relying solely on psychometric assessments.

According to the international literature, EI's limitations depend on the situation. Researchers from Europe, North America, and Asia have shown that emotionally intelligent leaders can successfully improve organizational outcomes, but only if the political and institutional contexts encourage ethical

governance and accountability (Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021; Humphrey, 2022; Rahman, Hossain, & Khan, 2023). However, in African contexts, where political meddling and patronage are more prevalent, Emotional Intelligence (EI) needs to be strategically used to manage intricate stakeholder networks without compromising organizational goals (Acheampong, 2021; Nyambura, 2022). According to the researchers, these findings support the idea that emotional intelligence (EI) should be viewed as a component of a larger leadership toolkit that also includes institutional knowledge, political awareness, and strategic management. While EI offers invaluable competencies for leaders to manage interpersonal dynamics, foster employee engagement, and navigate complex organisational challenges, it is not without limitations. Critiques regarding conceptual overlap, measurement validity, and insufficient attention to structural constraints are significant and must be considered when applying EI in public service leadership. From the researchers' viewpoint, the practical value of EI lies in its integration with systemic reforms, leadership development programmes, and context-sensitive strategies that address both human and institutional factors. Particularly in South African public service contexts, EI should be conceptualised as a necessary but insufficient tool: it enables leaders to mediate conflict, maintain team cohesion, and enhance relational effectiveness, but its success ultimately depends on complementary organisational and political reforms that strengthen accountability, reduce patronage, and promote performance-driven culture.

2.7 Implications for Public Service Leadership

In global, African, and South African contexts, the reviewed literature emphasizes that emotional intelligence (EI) is a crucial factor in determining leadership effectiveness, impacting outcomes like employee engagement, team cohesion, conflict resolution, and organizational performance (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2020; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021; Botha, 2022). High EI leaders are better able to resolve conflicts at work, manage intricate interpersonal relationships, and create collaborative and productive work environments. However, there is still a lack of research on the use of emotional intelligence (EI) in managing underperforming staff members who have social or political ties to leadership, especially in politically charged public service settings. This gap presents both a theoretical and practical opportunity to examine how EI can serve as a strategic leadership tool while acknowledging its limitations in environments constrained by structural and political factors. From the researchers' perspective, addressing this gap is essential to advancing leadership theory and improving public service outcomes in politically sensitive organisations. The literature review has a wide range of implications for public service leadership.

First and foremost, leadership development programs ought to systematically incorporate emotional intelligence (EI). The complex social and political realities of public service leadership necessitate additional competencies in emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and self-awareness, whereas traditional leadership training frequently emphasizes technical competence, policy knowledge, or administrative procedures (Humphrey, 2022; Clarke, 2022). Addressing performance gaps without inciting resistance or causing conflict at work is easier for leaders who are able to control their own emotional reactions, comprehend the demands and motivations of their team members, and handle politically delicate situations. According to researchers, incorporating emotional intelligence (EI) into leadership development programs gives leaders useful tactics for successfully juggling organizational, political, and interpersonal demands.

Second, in addition to technical expertise, EI competencies should be given priority in recruitment and selection strategies for leadership positions in the public sector. According to research, emotionally intelligent leaders are better at handling conflict, establishing trust, and negotiating intricate stakeholder relationships (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021; Rahman, Hossain, & Khan, 2023). These competencies are essential for maintaining performance management and organizational integrity in politically charged settings like South African municipalities or provincial departments, especially when handling underperforming staff members who are politically protected (Maseko, 2022; AGSA, 2023). According to the researchers, evaluating EI at the hiring process guarantees that leaders have the strategic insight and people skills required to handle politically delicate situations while upholding institutional accountability.

Thirdly, even though Emotional Intelligence (EI) has a lot to offer in terms of improving leadership effectiveness, its usefulness depends on complementary institutional reforms. Political patronage, inadequate accountability systems, and long-standing governance issues can counteract the effects of emotionally intelligent leadership practices, according to research from South Africa and other African contexts (Botha, 2022; Acheampong, 2021). According to the researchers, EI works best when paired with structural interventions that uphold accountability, promote transparency, and lessen political meddling. As such, it shouldn't be viewed as a stand-alone remedy. To guarantee long-lasting performance gains and organizational resilience, public service organizations must take a two-pronged approach that combines governance reforms with emotionally intelligent leadership techniques.

Lastly, these ramifications affect governance procedures, organizational culture, and policy in addition to operational leadership. Public service organizations can foster a culture of moral leadership, helpful criticism, and cooperative problem-solving by acknowledging the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in managing politically sensitive employee dynamics. In addition to improving daily operational effectiveness, this strategy fortifies public trust and organizational legitimacy, both of which are critical in environments marked by political scrutiny and pressures on service delivery (Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021; Clarke, 2022). According to the researchers, incorporating emotional intelligence (EI) into institutional policy, hiring practices, and leadership frameworks is therefore a strategic requirement for modern public service governance rather than a choice.

To conclude, research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EI) has a positive impact on leadership outcomes in South Africa, Africa, and the world. Its potential for handling underperforming, politically connected workers is an important topic for study and application. There are three implications for leadership in public service: first, integrate emotional intelligence (EI) into leadership development programs to improve relational and political management skills; second, integrate EI competencies into recruitment and selection procedures; and third, combine systemic governance reforms with emotionally intelligent leadership practices to make sure that political meddling or entrenched patronage won't undermine their effectiveness. According

to the researchers, these integrated approaches provide a way to increase public service leadership's effectiveness, accountability, and resilience while tackling the structural and interpersonal issues that arise in politically complex organizational settings.

2.8 Conclusion of Literature Review

According to the literature reviewed in this chapter, emotional intelligence (EI) is a crucial skill for successful leadership in South African, African, and international settings. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to handle interpersonal relationships, settle disputes, inspire followers, and promote team cohesion, all of which improve organizational performance, according to empirical research (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2020; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021; Humphrey, 2022). Emotional intelligence has been associated with enhanced employee engagement, trust in leadership, and adaptive decision-making in a variety of contexts, including Europe, Asia, and North America. This suggests that EI is universally applicable in both routine and crisis-driven organizational settings (Clarke, 2022; Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021; Rahman, Hossain, & Khan, 2023). Within Africa, and particularly South Africa, EI is emerging as a relevant but contextually nuanced leadership resource. African studies suggest that emotionally intelligent leaders can effectively mediate interpersonal conflicts, navigate resource constraints, and maintain performance even in environments characterised by political interference and organisational complexity (Acheampong, 2021; Nyambura, 2022; Botha, 2022). In South Africa, the persistence of politically connected employees, cadre deployment, and patronage appointments complicates the leadership landscape, particularly in municipalities and provincial departments where accountability mechanisms are often weak (AGSA, 2023; Maseko, 2022). While EI equips leaders with the competencies to manage these dynamics—through self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills—the literature also underscores its limitations. Structural constraints, entrenched political networks, and weak governance systems often impede the full effectiveness of emotionally intelligent leadership strategies (Botha, 2022; Maseko, 2022).

The review also reveals significant gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the management of low-performing employees who are socially or politically connected to leadership. While existing scholarship highlights EI's role in general leadership effectiveness, conflict resolution, and team management (Cherniss, 2021; Humphrey, 2022), there is limited focus on its strategic application in politically sensitive personnel management. This is particularly relevant in South African public service contexts, where leaders must balance performance management with political considerations and workplace harmony. From the researchers's perspective, addressing this gap is essential for both theoretical advancement and practical leadership development, as it bridges the divide between interpersonal competencies and the structural realities of public service governance. This review has three implications. First, it emphasizes how important it is to incorporate emotional intelligence (EI) into leadership development programs so that leaders can maintain organizational performance while managing politically sensitive interpersonal dynamics. In order to ensure that leaders have the emotional and strategic skills required to successfully navigate complex organizational environments, it also proposes that emotional intelligence (EI) be a criterion in the hiring and selection processes for public service leadership. Third, the review emphasizes that systemic governance reforms, including enhanced accountability mechanisms, transparency measures, and policies that lessen the impact of political patronage, are necessary to supplement EI alone. In conclusion, this literature review confirms that EI is a vital leadership competency with global, continental, and local significance. However, the practical application of EI in managing low-performing, socially or politically connected subordinates remains underexplored. By focusing on this intersection, the present study contributes both theoretically and practically to public service leadership literature. It demonstrates that while EI enhances leaders' relational effectiveness, strategic acumen, and ability to maintain workplace cohesion, its full potential can only be realised when aligned with broader institutional reforms. Ultimately, this research provides a framework for understanding how emotionally intelligent leadership can be operationalised in politically complex environments, offering actionable insights for leadership development, recruitment, and governance policies aimed at improving public sector performance and accountability.

3. Theoretical Framework

Goleman's (1998) model of emotional intelligence (EI), which continues to be one of the most significant frameworks in leadership research, serves as the theoretical cornerstone of this investigation. Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills are the five fundamental elements of emotional intelligence (EI) that Goleman identified. These elements work together to determine a leader's capacity to control their own and others' emotions. It has been demonstrated that these elements affect organizational outcomes, decision-making, conflict resolution, and leadership effectiveness (Miao et al., 2020; Clarke, 2022).

- Self-awareness allows leaders to recognise their emotional states, biases, and triggers, which is crucial when managing sensitive situations involving underperforming yet socially or politically connected subordinates.
- Self-regulation equips leaders with the capacity to control impulses and respond with composure rather than reactivity, reducing the likelihood of escalating conflicts with employees who may wield political influence.
- Motivation fosters resilience and commitment to organisational goals, enabling leaders to persist in addressing underperformance despite systemic or political pressures.
- Empathy enhances leaders' ability to understand the perspectives of subordinates, which can facilitate constructive dialogue rather than punitive confrontation.
- Social skills provide leaders with tools to negotiate, influence, and communicate effectively, critical in environments where political dynamics complicate management.

Goleman's framework is still applicable in public service settings, according to recent research. Rahman et al. (2023), for instance, showed how EI competencies directly improve leaders' conflict resolution skills in South Asian public organizations. In a similar vein, Humphrey (2022) contended that EI helps leaders establish credibility and trust in politically delicate situations, thereby boosting their legitimacy. According to Botha (2022) and Maseko (2022), EI is becoming more and more important in South Africa for overcoming politically entrenched performance issues, especially in municipalities where the deployment of cadres compromises accountability. Goleman's model thus offers a strong theoretical framework for this investigation. In addition to emotional intelligence, this study makes use of Hochschild's (1983) idea of emotional labour, which is the control of emotions and expressions in order to satisfy professional and organizational standards. In order to preserve institutional harmony, public service leaders must frequently conceal their frustration or disapproval while juggling their professional responsibilities with political realities, which frequently necessitates emotional labour (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Leaders must project fairness, patience, and professionalism even in the face of opposition or meddling, which makes emotional labour particularly important when dealing with underperforming but politically connected staff.

Hochschild's theories have been broadened by recent research, which connects emotional labour to employee engagement, leadership resilience, and leadership (Mann, 2021; Cheung & Tang, 2022). When political pressures clash with professional standards, African public administration leaders frequently encounter "emotional dissonance," which is the conflict between personal feelings and expected behaviours (Nyambura, 2022). Therefore, it is essential for leaders to recognize and manage emotional labour in order to maintain their effectiveness without sacrificing moral principles or organizational integrity. Hochschild's emotional labour concept and Goleman's emotional intelligence framework work together to offer a thorough theoretical foundation for analysing leadership techniques in situations where poor performance interacts with social and political relationships. While emotional labour emphasizes the behavioural demands placed on leaders in politically charged environments, emotional intelligence (EI) explains the competencies leaders need. By incorporating these viewpoints, the study's analytical ability to tackle the complex issues of public service leadership is strengthened.

4. Methodology

With an emphasis on conceptual and empirical literature, this study uses a qualitative research design. The methodological approach is based on a thorough literature review, which makes it possible to synthesize findings from various contexts and identify recurrent themes pertaining to leadership, emotional intelligence, and politically connected subordinates.

4.1 Data Collection

A comprehensive review of scholarly literature was conducted using peer-reviewed journals, books, and policy reports published within the last five years. Databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were consulted, with particular emphasis on literature from South Africa, Africa, and global contexts to ensure contextual balance. Keywords included "emotional intelligence," "public service leadership," "emotional labour," "political patronage," and "low-performing employees."

4.2 Case Study Analysis

Theoretical literature was reviewed, and case studies from different public service organizations were looked at. Political ties make performance management more difficult, as demonstrated by the documented difficulties in South African municipalities (AGSA, 2023; Maseko, 2022). Based on case studies in Nigeria (Okpara & Edwin, 2021), Kenya (Nyambura, 2022), and other international contexts like Malaysia (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021) and Canada (Filice & Weese, 2024), comparative insights were derived.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed thematically, guided by the five components of Goleman's EI model and the concept of emotional labour. Themes were categorised into (1) leadership competencies, (2) political and social dynamics, and (3) strategies for managing underperformance. This analytical strategy allowed the study to integrate theoretical constructs with practical observations from real-world case studies.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The study does not directly interact with human participants because it solely uses secondary data from published research and case studies. Therefore, ethical clearance was not necessary. Academic research ethics, such as proper citation, fair presentation of the evidence, and critical interaction with opposing viewpoints, were upheld, nevertheless. In order to offer a comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence (EI) and emotional labor can be used to manage underperforming but politically and socially connected subordinates in public service leadership contexts, the methodological approach integrates theoretical frameworks with empirical data.

5. Results

The analysis of existing literature, case studies, and conceptual frameworks revealed several findings regarding the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in managing low-performing subordinates who hold social or political connections within public service environments. The results provide insight into how EI competencies empower leaders to address performance challenges effectively while maintaining workplace cohesion and organisational integrity.

5.1 Recognition and Addressing of Performance Issues

One of the most recurrent conclusions is that leaders with high EI are better at spotting and handling subpar work without making things more tense between people. In times of stress, leaders who possess self-awareness and self-regulation are able to control their emotions and give constructive criticism instead of defensive criticism (Miao et al., 2020). According to research conducted in South Africa, leaders with higher EI are better able to handle the emotionally taxing environment of performance reviews, especially when social and political pressures are present (Sithole, 2021). Globally, EI has been linked to improved supervisory practices. Studies from the European Union and the United States demonstrate that emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to provide clear expectations and structured feedback, even when addressing underperformance linked to nepotism or patronage (Clarke, 2020; Lopes et al., 2021). These competencies are especially critical in public service organisations, where underperformance often has direct consequences for service delivery and citizen trust (Filice & Weese, 2024). The results also suggest that leaders who lack EI are more prone to avoid conflict altogether, allowing underperformance to persist, or to react harshly, thereby worsening workplace tensions (Kiganda, 2022). This finding reinforces the notion that EI is not merely beneficial but essential in contexts where leadership decisions intersect with social or political sensitivities.

5.2 Empathy, Social Skills, and Relationship Management

The importance of social skills and empathy in managing intricate interpersonal relationships is another noteworthy discovery. Leaders who possess empathy are able to comprehend the viewpoint of underperforming employees, especially those who depend on their social or political connections for protection at work. This knowledge enables leaders to strike a balance between accountability and compassion, guaranteeing that interventions are just but encouraging (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). Empathy has been associated with decreased workplace conflict and increased team cohesion in African contexts. According to a Kenyan study, emotionally intelligent leaders who handled performance issues fairly and empathetically were able to lessen perceptions of political bias and favouritism (Omondi, 2020). Similarly, studies conducted in South Africa show that empathy helps to preserve employee trust even in the face of disciplinary measures (Botha, 2022). Social skills, including communication and negotiation, further enhance leaders' ability to mediate conflicts and maintain workplace harmony. Leaders with strong social skills are able to defuse tensions between low-performing but politically connected subordinates and their peers, preventing resentment and divisions within teams (Chawla & Ghosh, 2021). This competency is critical in public service environments where collegiality and collective effort are required to deliver essential services.

5.3 Active Listening, Constructive Feedback, and Conflict Resolution

The outcomes also demonstrate the efficacy of particular tactics that are improved by EI. Before addressing performance issues, leaders can better understand employee motivations and concerns by using active listening, which has become a crucial tool. By fostering open communication and fostering trust, active listening lowers defensiveness and increases the possibility of behavioural change (Kerr et al., 2021).

Another important tactic is to provide constructive criticism in an emotionally intelligent manner. Performance gains are more likely to be sparked by leaders who present feedback as opportunities for improvement rather than as criticism (Miao et al., 2020). It has been demonstrated that emotionally intelligent feedback systems in South African municipalities reduce opposition from politically connected staff members who might otherwise view accountability measures as politically motivated (Ramukumba, 2022). Conflict resolution skills are particularly important when managing low-performing subordinates who benefit from social or political protection. Leaders with high EI are better able to mediate disputes and create solutions that preserve relationships while upholding organisational standards (Kiganda, 2022). For example, a case study from Ghana's public service revealed that emotionally intelligent leaders were able to reduce the negative impact of patronage by addressing underperformance through mediation and dialogue, rather than punitive measures that could provoke political backlash (Acheampong, 2021).

5.4 EI and Team Cohesion

The findings consistently indicate that EI plays a critical role in fostering team cohesion. Peers who feel that workplace expectations are unfair are frequently resentful of low-performing subordinates with close political ties. By encouraging open communication, acting fairly, and making sure that accountability procedures are applied uniformly to all staff members, leaders with high EI can lessen this resentment (Botha, 2022). This relationship between EI and team cohesion is supported by research conducted worldwide. According to a Canadian study, even in politically delicate settings, emotionally intelligent leaders promoted greater levels of trust and cooperation among their teams (Filice & Weese, 2024). According to research conducted in Asian public sectors, Emotional Intelligence (EI) boosts team morale and lessens the detrimental effects of patronage and favouritism (Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021).

5.5 Organisational Integrity and Accountability

An additional discovery pertains to the wider organizational consequences of emotional intelligence. High EI leaders uphold organizational integrity in addition to addressing concerns with individual performance. Leaders can hold subordinates accountable while avoiding charges of bias or political targeting by implementing Emotional Intelligence (EI) competencies (Sithole, 2021). The public's trust in government institutions depends on a culture of justice and meritocracy, which is fostered by this. Poor accountability is still a problem in South African public service institutions, according to the Auditor-General (AGSA, 2023), and it is frequently connected to political meddling in management. The findings imply that emotional intelligence (EI) can serve as a buffer, giving leaders the tools they need to deal with these demands while upholding accountability. In doing so, EI contributes to the professionalisation of the public service and the enhancement of service delivery outcomes.

5.6 Global, African, and South African Perspectives

Although the literature from around the world clearly shows that emotional intelligence (EI) has a positive impact on leadership outcomes, African contexts offer more information. Research conducted in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria has repeatedly shown that emotional intelligence (EI) aids leaders in overcoming the particular difficulties posed by political meddling and patronage in public service (Acheampong, 2021; Omondi, 2020). Similar to South Africa, these environments are marked by political networks that make managerial authority more difficult to understand. According to research conducted in South Africa, emotional intelligence (EI) is crucial for fostering resilience in leaders who work in settings with limited resources, political pressure, and public scrutiny (Botha, 2022; Sithole, 2021). South African leaders can better maintain accountability frameworks and reduce the risks of politically protected underperformance by implementing EI competencies.

5.7 Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the analysis revealed that:

- Leaders with high EI are more effective in recognising and addressing performance issues without triggering interpersonal conflicts.
- Empathy and social skills enable leaders to navigate politically sensitive relationships and sustain trust among employees.
- Strategies such as active listening, constructive feedback, and conflict resolution are enhanced by EI, leading to improved employee performance.
- EI contributes to team cohesion, organisational integrity, and accountability, thereby strengthening public service outcomes.
- South African, African, and global literature consistently support the application of EI as a tool for managing low-performing, socially, and politically connected subordinates in public service contexts.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the centrality of emotional intelligence (EI) in public service leadership, particularly in contexts where low-performing employees maintain strong social or political connections to executive management. The evidence demonstrates that leaders who exhibit high EI competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, are better equipped to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics while simultaneously addressing performance challenges (Miao et al., 2020; Clarke, 2022). This discussion examines the implications of these findings, situates them within existing literature, and explores their significance for organisational leadership practices, recruitment, and development programmes.

6.1 Emotional Intelligence as a Mechanism for Managing Underperformance

One of the main conclusions drawn from the analysis is that Emotional Intelligence (EI) gives leaders the means to deal with poor performance without creating animosity or conflict. High EI leaders are able to spot poor performance early on and take positive action, using social skills and empathy to keep the team cohesive (Filice & Weese, 2024). This is especially important in public service settings, where political patronage, cadre deployment, or deeply ingrained social networks can all contribute to persistent underperformance (Botha, 2022; Maseko, 2022). The protection of politically connected employees and merit-based performance management are often at odds in South African municipalities and provincial departments (AGSA, 2023). Leaders who apply EI principles are able to navigate these tensions by framing performance interventions in a manner that is fair, transparent, and respectful, thereby maintaining employee morale and mitigating resistance. The ability to regulate one's own emotions while understanding those of others reduces the likelihood of defensive responses, conflict escalation, or workplace disharmony (Kiganda, 2022). Globally, similar findings are reported in studies from Europe, North America, and Asia. Clarke (2022) demonstrated that emotionally intelligent public sector leaders in the European Union were more effective in balancing political pressures with organisational objectives, sustaining employee engagement while ensuring accountability. Even in settings marked by stakeholder complexity and resistance, Filice and Weese (2024) discovered that EI competencies helped leaders in Canada manage organizational change and uncertainty. Supramaniam and Singaravelloo (2021) noted that leaders with high EI enhanced organizational performance in Malaysia by engaging workers who might otherwise be protected by social networks through empathy and productive communication. Together, these

studies support the conclusion that emotional intelligence (EI) is a strategic leadership competency that is essential to handling politically or socially sensitive employee dynamics, rather than just a soft skill.

6.2 Enhancing Team Cohesion Through EI

The results also highlight the role of EI in fostering team cohesion and organisational harmony. Low-performing subordinates who maintain social or political ties often generate perceptions of unfairness among other employees, which can undermine morale and organisational commitment (Omondi, 2020). Leaders with high EI are able to mitigate these effects by demonstrating fairness, providing equitable performance feedback, and mediating conflicts. Empathy and active listening enable leaders to understand the perspectives of both low-performing employees and their peers, facilitating interventions that are perceived as just and developmental rather than punitive (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). In African public service contexts, research confirms that emotionally intelligent leadership contributes to organisational cohesion even in politically sensitive environments. Acheampong (2021) found that in Ghanaian public institutions, leaders who applied EI principles successfully balanced accountability with relationship management, thereby preserving team unity and improving overall performance outcomes. Similarly, studies in Kenya highlight that EI allows leaders to manage the competing demands of politically protected subordinates and performance-driven peers, fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual accountability (Nyambura, 2022). The global perspective aligns with these findings. In North American public service contexts, emotionally intelligent leaders sustain team cohesion by leveraging social skills and conflict resolution strategies to manage intergroup tensions (Humphrey, 2022). These cross-contextual similarities suggest that the relationship between EI, team cohesion, and effective performance management is robust and widely applicable, albeit requiring context-specific adaptation.

6.3 Emotional Labour and Leadership Resilience

The concept of emotional labour provides additional explanatory power for understanding how leaders manage low-performing, socially connected subordinates. Leaders must regulate their own emotions, often masking frustration or dissatisfaction, to comply with organisational norms and political expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Emotional labour intersects with EI, as leaders deploy self-regulation, empathy, and social skills to engage constructively with employees while maintaining personal composure and professional credibility (Mann, 2021). In South Africa, the necessity of emotional labour is particularly pronounced in municipalities, where political interference and cadre deployment frequently complicate leadership decisions (Maseko, 2022). Leaders who effectively integrate emotional labour into their daily practice can sustain resilience, reducing burnout and enhancing their capacity to manage challenging personnel dynamics. Globally, research indicates that emotionally intelligent leaders who practice emotional labour contribute to organisational stability, enabling teams to perform effectively despite contextual and interpersonal pressures (Cheung & Tang, 2022).

6.4 Implications for Leadership Development and Recruitment

The findings have significant implications for leadership development and recruitment strategies in public service organisations. First, leadership development programmes should explicitly incorporate EI training to equip leaders with the competencies needed to navigate politically sensitive and socially complex environments (Clarke, 2022). Training modules could focus on self-awareness, conflict management, empathy, and emotional regulation, alongside practical scenarios involving low-performing, socially connected employees.

Second, incorporating EI tests into recruitment and selection procedures might be advantageous. Organizations can find leaders who can handle the interpersonal complexities present in public service contexts by assessing candidates' emotional competencies. This is especially crucial in South Africa and other African nations where social networks and political patronage affect workplace dynamics (Botha, 2022; Okpara & Edwin, 2021). Psychometric evaluations, situational judgment tests, and structured interviews centred on EI-related competencies could all be used as selection tools.

Third, there are wider organizational ramifications to the use of EI. Effective EI practitioners improve organizational performance by fostering a culture of responsibility, equity, and cooperation. These leaders are in a better position to maintain institutional integrity, lessen the detrimental effects of political meddling, and increase public confidence in government agencies (AGSA, 2023; Miao et al., 2020).

6.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the results demonstrate the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in public service leadership, a number of limitations should be taken into account. First, the majority of the evidence comes from case studies and secondary data, which might restrict the applicability of the findings in other public service contexts. Second, the effectiveness of EI strategies may be moderated by the influence of more general systemic factors, such as labour laws, institutional governance structures, and political meddling. Future studies could examine how emotional intelligence (EI) appears in real-time interactions between leaders and politically connected subordinates using primary qualitative or mixed-method approaches. The long-term effects of EI-based leadership interventions on worker performance and organizational outcomes could also be investigated through longitudinal research. Comparative studies conducted in several African nations would shed light on how EI is modified for various public service contexts.

6.6 Conclusion of Discussion

The results show that public service leaders who are in charge of underperforming staff members who have political or social ties must possess emotional intelligence. Leaders can improve overall effectiveness, maintain organizational integrity, promote team cohesion, and constructively address underperformance by utilizing EI competencies. Leadership capacity can be strengthened by incorporating emotional intelligence (EI) into recruitment and leadership development programs, especially in politically complex settings like South Africa and other African public service institutions. These results lay the groundwork for further study and the creation of public sector policies while also advancing our understanding of the real-world applications of emotional intelligence in leadership.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the capacity of public service leaders to manage low-performing subordinates who are socially or politically connected. These recommendations are anchored in the principles of emotional intelligence (EI) and the broader organisational context of public service institutions in South Africa, Africa, and globally.

7.1 Integration of EI Training into Leadership Development Programmes

The study highlights the critical role of EI in enabling leaders to address performance issues constructively while maintaining organisational harmony. Accordingly, it is recommended that leadership development programmes explicitly incorporate EI training. Such training should focus on enhancing competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills, which are essential for managing complex interpersonal and politically sensitive dynamics (Clarke, 2022; Miao et al., 2020). In addition to scenario-based simulations that mimic actual public service difficulties, training modules may incorporate hands-on activities in conflict resolution, emotional control, and active listening. Municipalities in South Africa, for instance, frequently deal with politically connected staff members whose poor performance may jeopardize the provision of services (Botha, 2022; Maseko, 2022). Giving leaders the abilities to overcome these obstacles can promote responsibility while preserving team unity. According to research, leaders who receive training centred on emotional intelligence (EI) exhibit increased resilience, better interpersonal communication, and improved organizational performance (Filice & Weese, 2024; Humphrey, 2022).

7.2 Utilisation of EI Assessments in Recruitment and Selection

Including Emotional Intelligence (EI) tests in leadership hiring and selection procedures is another important suggestion. In public service settings, where employees may have close social or political ties, emotional competencies are important indicators of leadership effectiveness (Okpara & Edwin, 2021; Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021). Psychometric tests, structured interviews, and situational judgment tests are examples of selection tools that can be used to evaluate candidates' capacity for conflict resolution, emotional control, and positive team influence. Organizations can improve managerial capacity to handle intricate interpersonal dynamics and maintain accountability structures, even in politically delicate situations, by making sure that leaders have the requisite emotional intelligence (EI) competencies (Nyambura, 2022). Moreover, the assessment of EI during recruitment can support long-term succession planning. Leaders identified as possessing high EI are more likely to adapt to the evolving demands of public service environments, maintaining organisational integrity and fostering a culture of fairness and professionalism (Mann, 2021).

7.3 Encouragement of a Culture of Open Communication and Feedback

The findings suggest that emotionally intelligent leaders facilitate open communication and continuous feedback, which are crucial for addressing performance issues promptly. Establishing forums for transparent dialogue, regular performance appraisals, and structured feedback mechanisms can help ensure that low-performing employees understand expectations and receive guidance for improvement (Ramukumba, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). In reality, managers should use emotional intelligence (EI) skills like empathy and active listening to establish safe environments where staff members can voice difficulties and worries without worrying about consequences. In addition to improving individual performance, this strategy increases team cohesion and trust, which lowers the likelihood of conflict brought on by perceived injustice or political favouritism (Omondi, 2020; Acheampong, 2021). Transparent communication protocols can be especially helpful for South African and African public service organizations in reducing the impact of political connections and social networks on performance management. Leaders who regularly incorporate emotional intelligence (EI) into these procedures are better equipped to strike a balance between accountability and consideration for the social and political realities of their workforce.

7.4 Implementation of Strategies to Manage Emotional Labour

Public service leadership often entails significant emotional labour, requiring leaders to regulate their own emotions while managing the expectations of socially and politically connected subordinates (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Leaders must balance fairness, accountability, and professionalism, often under resource constraints and political pressures. Organizations should offer support systems like peer coaching, mentorship, stress management classes, and wellness initiatives in order to effectively manage emotional labour. Training in self-care, mindfulness, and emotional regulation techniques can help leaders avoid burnout and remain productive in high-pressure situations (Cheung & Tang, 2022; Mann, 2021). In addition

to improving leaders' well-being, addressing emotional labour improves organizational performance. According to Humphrey (2022) and Miao et al. (2020), leaders who are able to handle emotional demands make consistent decisions, show resilience when faced with political pressures, and set an example of professional behaviour that upholds organizational norms.

7.5 Policy and Organisational Recommendations

Organizations should establish policies that encourage the incorporation of emotional intelligence (EI) into performance management systems in addition to implementing interventions at the individual level. This could involve tying EI development to advancement and career advancement and formally acknowledging EI competencies in leadership assessment frameworks. Policies that safeguard the integrity of performance management procedures and deal with political meddling can also be used in conjunction with EI-based tactics to give leaders the structural backing they need to enforce accountability (Botha, 2022; AGSA, 2023). Lastly, in order to determine how leadership development programs affect team cohesion, employee performance, and organizational outcomes, they should be regularly reviewed. To make sure that EI-based interventions yield quantifiable benefits for the organization and the public it serves, evaluation metrics could include staff turnover, performance improvement rates, and employee engagement scores.

7.6 Summary of Recommendations

In conclusion, the recommendations derived from this study emphasise the strategic role of EI in public service leadership. By integrating EI training, assessments, open communication, and emotional labour management into leadership practices, organisations can enhance the capacity of leaders to manage low-performing, socially and politically connected subordinates effectively. These measures support organisational resilience, fairness, accountability, and overall performance, particularly in contexts characterised by political influence, complex interpersonal dynamics, and resource constraints.

8. Conclusion

This study emphasizes how important emotional intelligence (EI) is to improving leadership effectiveness in public service organizations, especially when it comes to handling underperforming staff members who have strong political or social ties to executive management. The results show that leaders who possess high EI competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills, can effectively manage the intricacies of professional relationships, lessen the detrimental effects of political patronage, and deal with poor performance in a positive way (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2020; Clarke, 2022). A key conclusion is that EI functions as both a personal and organisational resource. On a personal level, leaders who exercise emotional intelligence are better able to regulate their own emotional responses, manage stress, and approach performance management interactions with composure and fairness (Humphrey, 2022; Mann, 2021). This capacity enables them to engage with low-performing, socially connected subordinates without escalating conflict or compromising professional integrity. At the organisational level, EI contributes to fostering a culture of accountability, transparency, and collaboration, which strengthens team cohesion and improves overall performance outcomes (Botha, 2022; Filice & Weese, 2024).

Policy and practice are also significantly impacted by the use of Emotional Intelligence in public service leadership. Emotional intelligence training should be incorporated into leadership development programs to improve leaders' capacity to operate in politically delicate situations while upholding justice and equity (Clarke, 2022). To guarantee that leaders' skills and the intricate interpersonal requirements of public service positions are in line, recruitment and selection procedures should evaluate emotional competencies (Okpara & Edwin, 2021; Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021). In South African municipalities, where social connections and political networks can impede service delivery and make performance management more difficult, these interventions are especially important (AGSA, 2023; Maseko, 2022). Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of managing emotional labour. Leaders often face the dual pressures of maintaining professional standards while navigating politically and socially complex interpersonal dynamics. By equipping leaders with strategies to manage emotional labour, including emotional regulation, mindfulness, and stress management programmes, organisations can prevent burnout, sustain leadership resilience, and ensure consistent decision-making in challenging contexts (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Cheung & Tang, 2022).

The study also advances knowledge of how Emotional Intelligence (EI) improves organizational effectiveness and team cohesion in larger African and international contexts. Even in settings marked by political patronage or uncertainty, emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to resolve disputes, build trust, and increase employee engagement, according to research from Kenya, Ghana, Malaysia, and Canada (Acheampong, 2021; Omondi, 2020; Supramaniam & Singaravelloo, 2021; Filice & Weese, 2024). Although its application necessitates contextual adaptation to local political, social, and institutional realities, these cross-contextual insights show that emotional intelligence (EI) is a leadership competency that is universally valuable. In conclusion, the evidence demonstrates that EI is not merely an adjunct to technical managerial skills but a central determinant of leadership success in public service contexts. Leaders who effectively apply EI can address underperformance constructively, maintain organisational integrity, and enhance both individual and collective outcomes. The implications of this study are significant for leadership development, recruitment strategies, and organisational policies, highlighting the need to integrate EI competencies into public service management practices.

In order to comprehend the subtleties of how organizational, political, and cultural factors affect the efficacy of emotional intelligence (EI) in leadership, future research should concentrate on investigating the application of EI in various public service contexts, including cross-national and comparative studies. The long-term effects of EI-based interventions on worker performance, organizational culture, and public service delivery could be further

investigated through longitudinal research. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective leadership in intricate, politically influenced public service environments, research could also examine the ways in which Emotional Intelligence (EI) interacts with other leadership frameworks, such as transformational and servant leadership (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Kerr et al., 2021). By highlighting the strategic value of EI in managing socially and politically connected employees, this study offers a framework for enhancing leadership effectiveness, promoting fairness and accountability, and ultimately improving the quality and responsiveness of public service delivery in South Africa, across the African continent, and in global public administration contexts.

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