



Creative Construction Conference 2016

## The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Managing Construction Projects

Lauren Satchwell, John Smallwood

*Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, PO Box 77000, Port Elizabeth, 6031, South Africa*

---

### Abstract

The success of any construction project is dependent on a range of factors. An often overlooked aspect is the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in ensuring the sustainability of a firm and promoting success and excellence. However, limited research has been conducted regarding the status and role of EI within the construction industry.

A literature survey pertaining to the role of EI in managing construction projects informed the development of an interview protocol, which was used to interview representatives of construction firms that are members of the East Cape Master Builders Association (ECMBA).

The salient findings include: most construction firms do not implement stress management strategies during the execution of construction projects; supervisors and workers do not necessarily develop negative attitudes on construction projects due to management's poor intrapersonal skills, however employees believe that EI is important and management need to be emotionally intelligent to be successful in construction; short-comings between levels of management exist during the execution of construction projects due to differences in opinions and personalities, and management encounter unforeseen problems and changes during the construction process and contain little knowledge of the improvements which can be made within the firm to adapt to changes. The EI competencies in the form of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management are important in terms of the managing of construction, and thus managers need to be emotionally intelligent, and for that matter employees too.

Conclusions include: the level of EI in construction is not ideal; the construction industry is stressful; there is a need to 'target' and manage stress, and there are underlying or root causes of stress.

Recommendations include: tertiary construction management programmes and construction firms should focus on the development of EI; communication should be promoted and forums directed towards promoting teamwork should be arranged; construction firms should develop stress management strategies and implement related programmes in order to help management and employees deal with stress.

**Keywords:** Construction, Emotional Intelligence, Performance

---

### 1. Introduction

EI is defined as "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and / or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions." [1] The construct of EI is a vastly significant and dynamic quality recognised in employees who produce results, generate transformational change, and lead the firm as the motivating and inspiring force.

A number of factors influence the successful undertaking of people's private and working lives [2]. In the business world, people are more often than not viewed as the greatest asset to organisations. This statement highlights that human capital fulfilling different functions within an organisation has a far greater impact than tools and technology alone. Emotionally intelligence competencies go hand in hand with cognitive skills, where top performers encompass both. The absence of EI competencies can hinder the intellectual and technical proficiencies a person may possess and therefore EI is of greater importance on complex construction projects. In saying that, irrational and out-of-control emotions can make smart people 'stupid' and ultimately forfeit the success of a project [3].

Cherniss and Goleman [4] identified four domains of emotional intelligence namely: self-awareness; social awareness; self-Management, and relationship management. The importance of each area and their role in

managing construction projects is the purpose of the research reported on in an endeavour to contribute to improving project performance and employee job satisfaction.

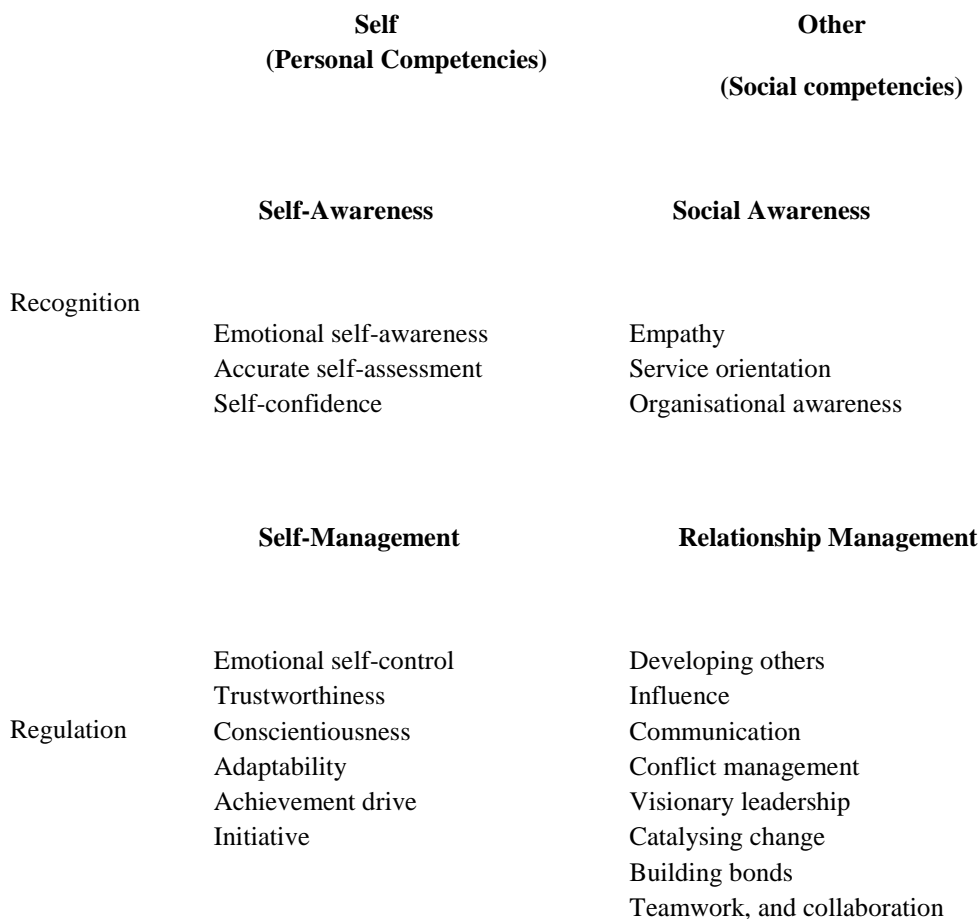
The objective of this paper is to report on a study that explored the perceptions of contractors regarding the use of goals / targets to improve H&S performance in South African construction. The research reported on explored 'How important are the following actions / beliefs / interventions / practices / states in terms of achieving zero accidents, injuries, fatalities, and disease in construction', and 'to what extent do you disagree / agree with statements relative to construction H&S'.

## 2. Review of the Literature

### 2.1. Emotional Intelligence Competencies

To be emotionally intelligent means to understand and be aware of personal emotions and others. Given that management entails working through people, managers need to 'manage' the aforementioned effectively. Ultimately, it is the ability to express oneself in a group or to an individual in a non-destructive manner and to successfully facilitate personal, change, and problems, while being conscious of one's behaviour as stated by Bar-On, Maree and Elias [4]. A number of schools use various models to elucidate EI as a contributing factor to continuous organisational success, outstanding leadership, and job satisfaction. Cherniss and Goleman [4] identified a framework of emotional competencies comprising twenty competencies nesting in four dimensions of emotional intelligence namely self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A framework of Emotional Competencies.



Extracted from Cherniss & Goleman [4]

The framework consists of personal (perceiving and managing one's own emotions) and social competencies (perceiving and managing emotions in others):

Self-awareness: one's ability to recognise one's own feelings and emotions; the affect positive or negative emotions might have on one's ability to perform effectively and assessing one's strengths and limitations;  
Self-management: this involves the ability to choose how one thinks, feels and acts; including controlling one's impulses and reactions to varying situations;  
Social awareness: one's ability to recognise others feelings and emotions; showing empathy towards others; as well as understanding situations impartially and unassumingly, and  
Relationship management: this implies developing others needs and skills; facilitating an environment for open communication and teamwork and identifying conflict resolution strategies to allow for fair negotiation and discussion.

## *2.2. Emotional Intelligence in the Construction Industry*

EI, which is a crucial soft skill, is reported to have many benefits, yet it remains largely unexplored in construction project management [5]. The construction industry is conventionally perceived as being slow to implement new management techniques, in particular, the area of human resources. EI has proven to forecast the success of construction projects and improve project performance even though it is a relatively new approach in the industry [5]. Human factors are the driving force of any organisation and the successful execution of construction projects is largely dependent on the EI competencies of the project team and subordinates. Research determined that EI, when translated into practical competencies, are twice as important as IQ in contributing to outstanding and operational project performance [3]. It is thus clear that EI is a very important component of effective construction project completion in terms of open communication, delegation, proactive behaviour and conflict resolution [5]. The aforementioned is underscored by Love, Edwards and Wood [6], the most challenging or demanding aspect of construction projects are the interpersonal and relational aspects of the construction team's role. A number of EI skills and competencies are fundamental to construction managers, supervisors and workers as they interact with a variety of individuals at various levels such as clients, consultants, subcontractors and suppliers on a regular basis [6].

## *2.3. Applying EI competencies to construction management*

Construction projects are generally people intensive. This can result in conflict occurring and high levels of stress. Negative attitudes develop due to poor intrapersonal skills as well as the mental well-being of role players being compromised. In order to cope with the negative emotions and unforeseen problems experienced on the job, which inevitably affect project performance, construction teams need a better understanding of and EI competencies in the form of knowledge and skills. "Leadership greatly impacts a number of aspects of organizational effectiveness, which includes production quality, efficiency, flexibility, satisfaction, competitiveness and development." (Chinowsky and Songer, 2011: 11). Nearly 90 percent of outstanding leader's qualities comprise of EI, which separates a good leader from a mediocre leader. Furthermore, teamwork is an important factor within the construction industry due to the increase in collaboration and group performance. Given the confirmed link between high performing firms within the construction industry and EI managers should strive to promote team efficiency and success through EI proficiencies [7].

Given that employees tend to seek support and empathy from their managers, managers have the potential to influence their employee's emotions and attitudes, and therefore they should focus on promoting enthusiasm and positivity and thereby enhanced performance, as opposed to negativity and anxiety, and consequent poor performance. [8].

## **3. Research**

### *3.1. Research method*

The targeted population included all contractors listed on the ECMBA list within the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan. The sample size included eight purposefully selected contracting firms within Port Elizabeth. One employee from each firm was identified based on experience and availability, and contacted telephonically to determine his willingness to be interviewed.

In terms of qualifications 50% of respondents were qualified with a diploma, 37.5% with an Honours degree, 25% with a Bachelors degree, and 12.5% with a BTech degree. In terms of occupations, 75% were senior site agents, and 25% were contracts managers. Nearly the majority of respondents (62.5%) had worked  $\geq 20$  years in construction, and 12.5% for each of  $> 0 \leq 5$  years,  $> 5 \leq 10$  years, and  $> 10 \leq 15$  years. In terms of age 50.0% of the respondents were  $> 35 \leq 45$ , 25.0% were  $> 25 \leq 35$  years, and 12.5% each of  $> 55 \leq 65$  years, and 12.5%  $> 65$

years. 100% of the interviewees were male. In summary, the interviewees had immense experience, 75% having more than 15 years of managerial experience in construction, 83.3% of which have more than 20 years of managerial experience in construction. All eight respondents are male and obtain a degree or diploma from a tertiary educational institution. The aforementioned indicates that the interviewees possess sufficient experience and knowledge pertaining to the construction industry and the data obtained from them is reliable and relevant.

### 3.2. Research findings

Interviewees were asked if they knew what EI is. 75% of the respondents knew what EI is, while 25% of the respondents had no idea what EI is. The respondents who were familiar with the term were asked to describe their understanding of EI. The responses received included:

Interviewee 1: "EI is all the soft, fluffy stuff."

Interviewee 3: "Happy place. It's emotive language. It is to have the ability to know when to have which emotions, so that you can defuse any situation."

Interviewee 4: "EI is how you deal with the softer side of construction. How you handle different people in different stages and different phases. It is basically working with different personalities."

Interviewee 5: "Soft soaping someone and making them feel good. The people working for us are currently very negative because of the current economic conditions we are experiencing. Therefore, we need to motivate them and encourage them to work hard, emphasise teamwork and acknowledge the work they produce."

Interviewee 6: "If you start to scream and shout, your intelligence comes down."

Interviewee 7: "It is how you handle situations mostly. If you are an emotionally strong person, you will be able to think situations through rationally. If you are not emotionally strong, you tend to lose it and get angry and you don't think things through clearly."

The abovementioned interviewees were then asked if they think EI is important as well as why they thought EI is important, all of which agreed that EI is important. Two interviewees stated that one can no longer be a 'stick beater' as one used to be due to the changed conditions of the industry.

37.5% of the interviewees stated that their managers lack empathy. 37.5% concluded that the pressure of construction limits management's capacity to empathise with their employees. A further 37.5% concluded that to a certain extent, management does lack empathy depending on the type of project being executed, the company you are employed by and the people you are dealing with. Only one of the interviewees who agreed that management lacks empathy said that he has developed a negative attitude as a result. Another interviewee mentioned that when he was younger he would have developed a negative attitude but he no longer does because he is confident in his working ability.

A further interviewee said that management's lacking of empathy does not affect his performance, but it affects him as a person and those around you. One interviewee mentioned the following: "It does affect your performance. It depends on what type of person you are. You need to talk to those superiors and express your dissatisfaction and ask how we can fix the situation. I think a lot of employees don't do that because they are not comfortable approaching their superiors."

75% of the interviewees perceive that their manager / executive acknowledges them as individuals. One interviewee said that his manager does not acknowledge him as an individual. His comment was: "I believe I am just a money making machine for him. He only cares about his wife and his dogs." The interviewees were asked to explain why they believe that their manager / executive acknowledges them as individuals. One interviewee said that it comes back to teamwork. He said that within their firm, they have the philosophy that it takes both upwards and downwards to make a success of a business in terms of the firm's hierarchy. He relies on the success of the people working for him to make him a success and his manager allows him to be successful. He also mentioned that it is not necessarily a common thing within the construction industry, but within his firm, everyone tries to provide praise where it's due. Two interviewees agreed that their managers have given them managerial responsibilities, which proves that they are acknowledged in terms of their experience and trustworthiness. 75% of interviewees perceive that their manager / executive acknowledges the work they deliver. One (12.5%) interviewee said that his manager does not acknowledge the work that he delivers, because his manager is only interested in seeing the money come in. His manager never visits his projects, yet he always finds fault. When projects are successful, his manager never seems to notice. 37.5% of interviewees stated that the reason they perceive the work they deliver is acknowledged and appreciated is because of their position they hold in the firm and their responsibilities.

All interviewees were in consensus that there is a need for one's manager to be emotionally intelligent. The interviewees were then asked to explain why there is a need for one's manager to be emotionally intelligent. All

agreed that construction is people intensive, and people are emotional. EI often distinguishes a good manager from a bad manager.

The interviewees were asked if they experienced stress, of which 75% said 'Yes'. The other 25% said that they used to experience a great deal of stress, but since both developed stress-related illnesses in their earlier years, they no longer experience stress due to the medication they take for their health. In terms of how frequently they experience stress, 62.5% stated that they experience stress on a daily basis, and one (12.5%) said that he experiences stress three times a week. The interviewees were then asked to identify the main causes of stress. All the interviewees identified time, money, and people as being the major causes of stress. Comments include: "The activities and people on site. Construction is easy, it is people that make it difficult." and "Daily pressure. Time constraints. You have to do a task, which in any other given area would take you about two or three days to complete, you have to complete that task in one day in construction. Your superiors are unrealistic in the targets." 62.5% of interviewees stated that stress management strategies do not exist within the firm, while the other 37.5% were able to identify some form of stress management programme / strategy supported by their firm, in order to help employees deal with stress. Comments from those interviewees that responded in the negative include: "In the bigger companies, they have courses. I used to be extremely aggressive in my younger years because of stress. When I worked for the bigger companies, they would put me on courses and help me to deal with stress and that helped me a lot. With the smaller companies, there is no help." All three interviewees that responded in the affirmative stated that their firms either make use of either a psychologist or a counsellor, who is available and can be contacted to discuss any problems or issues of stress experienced. The same three interviewees were asked if they believe that the strategies are effective. One respondent said that he does not need to comment regarding the strategies which the firm provides in order to deal with stress. Another interviewee stated that the strategies can help for a period, but if nothing changes within the firm then they are not effective. The third interviewee said that the strategies implemented within the firm definitely do help. Furthermore, the five (62.5%) of interviewees who stated that their firms do not have stress management strategies within their firms to help them deal with stress all agreed that it is necessary to implement stress management strategies within the firm to encourage positivity and collaboration. In terms of interviewees' coping mechanisms adopted to deal with stress, all (100%) interviewees agreed that spending time with their families and incorporating one or two hobbies in their private time helps to cope with stress. Two interviewees had experienced heart attacks at a young age and both agreed that their heart attacks were likely to have been related to their highly stressful occupations. The majority of the interviewees acknowledged that one's health and well-being is compromised when one is under a great deal of stress and is thus a consequence of stress. Only one interviewee stated that stress could reap negativity. Three (37.5%) of the interviewees noted that stress can put strain on one's family life and on one's relationships within and outside the firm, while two (25%) interviewees highlighted that they in fact thrive on stress and become more productive as a result. The interviewees were asked to identify ways to reduce stress. Some of the responses include:

"Reducing stress is linked to the way in which you cope with it. Construction is not a production line where you go to work and know exactly what is going to happen in the day. You can do your planning as best as possible, but there will always be curved balls and it is how you deal with those curved balls, which can reduce stress."

If there were better structures in place within the firm, then a lot of stress could be reduced, and the shortage of skilled artisans in South Africa creates stress. If there were better quality labourers with the right knowledge and skill, a lot of stress could be reduced;

More assistance and recognition from top management could reduce stress, and

Reducing stress comes down to better planning, working with decent people, sharing responsibilities with your peers, and planning meetings on a daily basis.

87.5% of interviewees do not experience difficulty expressing their opinion in a group or to an individual. The remaining interviewee said 'Yes' and 'No'. Of those interviewees who do not experience difficulty expressing their opinion in a group or to an individual, two interviewees stated that they make use of their experience and knowledge when being assertive, and a further two stated that the style they apply to be assertive and express themselves will depend on the situation, circumstances, or people they are dealing with. The interviewee that responded 'Yes' and 'No' stated that the circumstances and the group or individual with whom he is communicating with will determine whether he will be able to act assertively. He struggles to act assertively with people he is not comfortable with or people who do not listen to him and thus he struggles to reason with them and get his point across. The same interviewee stated that in terms of emotions, he feels disappointed and a bit angry because of the difficulty experienced when expressing his opinion.

In terms of relationships with their superior, 62.5% of interviewees perceive that they are treated fairly and with respect by their manager / executive. Two (25%) clearly stated that their relationship with their superiors is non-existent. The interviewees were then asked to describe their relationship with their manager / executive. 50% of the interviewees were of the opinion that their relationship with their manager or boss is very good. Other interviewees responded as follows: "Non-existent."; "We have no relationship at all. We work together and that is

it.”, and “Where there are short-comings in our relationship, I think it is because he is under a lot of pressure. It is difficult for him to have a good relationship with me because he has his own stress and pressure to deal with and thus does not have the time.”

In terms of conflict 37.5% of interviewees identified money and time as being the major cause of conflict or disagreement arising between themselves and upper management. A further 37.5% noted that conflict arises between themselves and their superiors because their superiors are not involved with the daily on-site operations, yet their superiors interfere with their planning and criticise their work. Only one interviewee mentioned that he develops a negative attitude because of conflict arising between him and his superior. He also said that poor relationships are formed and you lose trust.

The interviewees were asked to describe their ‘relationship’ with themselves. The majority of the respondents stated that they have a good relationship with themselves. One respondent mentioned that he was his biggest critic and he generally puts a lot of pressure on himself.

In terms of teamwork, the majority (87.5%) of the interviewees stated that they give higher priority to the group’s goals than their personal goals. One interviewee stated that he maintains a balance between work and personal goals. Two (25%) interviewees stated that there is no ‘I’ in ‘team’.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The EI competencies in the form of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management are important in terms of the managing of construction, and thus managers need to be emotionally intelligent, and for that matter employees too.

However, relative to the interviewees, given the prevailing understanding of EI, the degree of empathy experienced, the nature of relationships experienced with superiors, the degree of recognition afforded, the occurrence of conflict, the degree of stress experienced, and the level of confidence, it can be concluded that the level of EI in construction is not ideal.

Given the degree of stress experienced it can be concluded that the construction industry is stressful, that there is a need to ‘target’ and manage stress, and although EI has major potential to contribute to mitigating stress, there are underlying or root causes of stress such as volume of work relative to project duration, , should be addressed at ‘source’.

Tertiary construction management programmes and construction firms should focus on the development of EI. Communication should be promoted and forums directed towards promoting teamwork should be arranged. Construction firms should develop stress management strategies and implement related programmes in order to help management and employees deal with stress. However, the underlying or root causes of stress such as volume of work relative to project duration, should be addressed at ‘source’.

#### **References**

- [1] Koubova, V. and Buchko, A.A. (2013). Life-work balance: Emotional intelligence as a crucial component of achieving both personal life and work performance. *Management Research Review Journal*, 36(7), 700-719.
- [2] Butler, C. and Chinowsky, P. (2006). Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Behavior in Construction Executives, *Journal of Management in Engineering*, 22(3), 119-125.
- [3] D. Goleman. Working with emotional intelligence, Bantam Books, New York, 1998.
- [4] C. Chernis and D. Goleman, The emotionally intelligent workplace: How to select for, measure and improve emotional intelligence in individuals, groups and organizations, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001.
- [5] Zhang, L. and Fan, W. 2013. Improving performance of construction projects: A project manager’s emotional intelligence approach. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 20(2), 195-207.
- [6] Love, P., Edwards, D. and Wood, E. (2011). Loosening the Gordian knot: the role of emotional intelligence in construction, *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 18(1), 50-65.
- [7] P.S. Chinowsky and A.D. Songer, Organisation Management in Construction. 1st Edition, Spon Press, Abingdon, 2011.
- [8] D. Goleman, R. Boyatzis and A. McKee, Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence, Business School Publishing Massachusetts, 2013.