



Leadership in Smart Cities: Emotional Intelligence as a Driver of Smart City Ecosystem Transformation

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the role of organizational leaders in the process of transforming urban areas into smart cities with a detailed analysis of the key challenges they face. The introduction of the smart city concept requires the modernization of leadership styles, organizational strategies, and resources as well as increased agility and adaptability to new internal and external business conditions. Current research indicates that emotional intelligence plays a key role in the efficient and effective management of these changes. Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine the impact of emotional intelligence on the leadership and economic performance of organizations in Serbia. Quantitative analysis showed that emotional intelligence significantly contributes to the quality of leadership. Additionally, it was found that it acts as a moderating factor in the relationship between leadership and economic performance of organizations. Research findings indicate a positive correlation between a higher level of emotional intelligence among leaders and improved economic results of the organizations. The obtained results show that the development of emotional intelligence in leaders is a key factor for successfully managing processes within the Smart City ecosystem. Furthermore, the findings of this research provide important guidelines for the strategic selection and development of leaders who will lead organizations in smart cities in Serbia.

Keywords: Leadership, Smart Cities, Emotional Intelligence, Economic Performance, Smart City Ecosystem

1 INTRODUCTION

In the digital age cities are changing their trajectories by following the "smart" revolution aimed at managing, providing, supporting, and ensuring proper planning for cities and their participants (Marchesani et al., 2023). Although the concept of a "smart city" is widely used for various purposes and from different perspectives, the literature still does not provide a precise definition (Sancino, Hudson, 2020). Despite this, "smart cities" and "intelligent cities" can respond to the challenges of urbanization (Albert, 2019). Smart cities leverage ICT to address urban challenges through an intelligent use of technology. Over time, the focus has shifted from being purely technology driven to emphasizing citizen engagement, resilience, and sustainable development (Sancino, Hudson, 2020).

Through examples of initiatives involving collaboration among different organizations and sectors (Bakici, 2012) as well as through the transformation of the world based on the successful implementation of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030, 2015) we are witnessing a fairer and more sustainable development path for every city (Boykova et al., 2016). In smart cities, innovative solutions are created through mutual collaboration for better integration of urban spaces (Jacques et al., 2024) while achieving sustainable development goals (Makkonen et al., 2024). Smart Cities are hubs for innovation and economic development with unmatched solution exchange and development. Organizational effectiveness hinges on its people: employees, shareholders, suppliers, customers and more. Firms boost customer satisfaction through regular feedback and enhance employee motivation via training, recognition, and competitive pay. Effective communication drives sound decision-making and keeps everyone aligned with organizational goals, as the ultimate goal of a smart city is sustainability (Manoharan et al., 2023).

For a smart city to function as a sustainable system while simultaneously achieving its broader goals, it is essential to assess how ready a city is to implement projects or programs (Pries-Heje & Cranefield, 2018) in line with the needs of modern leadership (Gurick, Felger, 2022). According to the McCleskey's research (2012), the knowledge is fundamental to develop leadership skills and encompasses core cognitive abilities, including analytical, practical, social, emotional, and contextual intelligence. Leadership effectiveness lies in the ability to understand the impact of leadership style on teams and organizations. Leadership style should be a result of one's attitude, personality, experience and emotional intelligence (Kochieyl et al., 224). A smart city leadership is underexplored both empirically and theoretically. Understanding emerging leadership styles in smart cities is crucial for shaping successful policies and practices as it depends on technology's role in 21st-century life. While smart governance is recognized as key, there is a notable lack of research that examines how leadership is actually exercised in these environments (Sancino, Hudson, 2020). Understanding leadership in a smart community is key to creating a harmonious society that respects diverse needs and goals. Smart cities open the path to social and emotional intelligence, promote intercultural understanding as successful leadership requires a complex combination of skills and behaviors (Gurick, Felger, 2022). Smart cities are complex ecosystems that use technology to address issues of urbanization, security, and sustainability, creating ecosystems that improve the quality of life and stimulate economic activity. A crucial role in this process is played by organizations, businesses, and a highly skilled workforce that enables the development and realization of sustainable ecosystems. Therefore, developing various competencies including emotional intelligence and leadership is key (Fitsilis, Kokkinaki, 2021). Therefore, the exploration of emotional intelligence is

indispensable for the essence of organizational behavior in the future (Ashkanasy et al., 2005).

2 LEADERSHIP AND EMOCIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The concept of leadership has existed since the very beginnings of human history. As humans developed collective life and organizational structures the need for leadership and management arose. In modern society, leadership is a key factor in the successful functioning of organizations and achieving their goals. Research shows that leadership is not a fixed category but a dynamic process that constantly adapts to changes in the business environment enabling organizations to effectively fulfill their mission and vision (Kiyak et al., 2020). The quality of leadership comes naturally to some while others acquire and develop these skills through work and active engagement supported by ethical and spiritual characteristics that are indispensable (Budur et al., 2019). The leader of the future, aside from knowledge and intelligence, stands out by his/her ability to apply their own emotional intelligence (McCleskey, 2014). Leading in a smart community requires a complex combination of leadership skills and all levels of intelligence: individual, emotional, and social. Exceptional leadership involves understanding and representing the needs of the ecosystem of a smart city's public and private entities, while organizational leadership in smart city settings aligns individual needs and creates solutions that enhance the overall progress of the organization (Gurick, Felger, 2022).

Dulewicz and Higgs (2003) highlight that academia and top management in companies increasingly recognize the key role of emotional intelligence in effective leadership. Modern research emphasizes its significance in professional advancement and research processes, while elements of emotional intelligence are increasingly integrated into tools for assessing leadership competencies and styles. Additionally, organizational culture plays a significant role in the development and application of these constructs in practice. Emotional intelligence (EI) is considered to be twice as important as IQ. Research indicates that EI forms the foundation for essential skills across various jobs. It involves the ability to recognize emotions, use them to support thinking, understand emotional meanings, and manage emotions effectively to foster personal and intellectual growth (Mayer et al., 2004). Research shows that Emotional intelligence may serve as a key factor for success in the workplace. Core competencies such as recognizing, understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others, are considered essential in most definitions of emotional intelligence (Schutte et al., 2014).

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to recognize and manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of others, both individually and within groups. In a smart city development enhancing emotional intelligence helps individuals develop skills to improve work performance, making self-awareness crucial. As a transversal skill, EI aids in understanding personal emotions, translating intentions into actions, and making informed decisions (Fitsilis, Kokkinaki, 2021). Emotional intelligence competencies, like self-awareness and self-control, are learned abilities that help recognize, understand, and use emotions effectively, leading to superior work performance. Most of above mentioned abilities demonstrated an impact on job outcomes. These include but are not limited to; new business creation and employment satisfaction which are the core goals of development efforts

(Boyatzis, 2008). This is particularly significant for leaders in organizations within Smart Cities. For example, the implementation of smart cities differs: in Asian regions, a technological, "top-down" approach is effective when building cities from the ground up. In contrast, European cities with their rich historical and cultural heritage and diverse social contexts would adopt a more complex, "bottom-up" approach. This method involves multiple stages, considering the interests of various stakeholders, and emphasizes developing human capital and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to drive qualitative changes in the urban environment and society (Boykova et al., 2016). Gerli et al. (2022) explore how psychological factors such as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and information-seeking influence skill development in the context of technology acceptance. The study explains how the interaction of cognitive and emotional elements shapes decisions regarding the adoption and use of smart technologies. The authors highlight that increasing digital skills does not guarantee automatic technology adoption and emphasize the importance of creating initiatives that ease this process. It is crucial for leaders in European countries to recognize this issue and accelerate the smart city implementation process through proper initiatives, and emotional intelligence is key both for recognizing and finding solutions that employees will accept without resistance. Organizations should prioritize emotional intelligence in hiring, alongside other technical skills and business expertise (Goleman, 2001).

Effective leadership is crucial during periods of change, particularly in the transformation of cities into smart cities, which brings significant organizational shifts. Research by Palmer et al. (2001) identifies a strong correlation between emotional intelligence and various aspects of transformational leadership, highlighting its role as a key factor in leadership effectiveness. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to observe, interpret, and respond to subordinates more effectively, shaping their workplace experiences. Furthermore, it is recognized as a strong predictor of leadership success (Kerr et al., 2006). Studies also confirm a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership (Leban & Zulauf, 2004). Leaders with high emotional intelligence are more inclined to adopt a transformational leadership style, as they possess the ability to inspire and motivate their followers (Barling et al., 2000).

Numerous studies have highlighted the significant impact of emotional intelligence on employee performance, yet there is a notable gap in research on its effect on economic performance, emphasizing the need for further exploration of this relationship. The findings suggest that understanding emotional intelligence and its influence on performance can enhance organizational value, as employees adopt best practices and contribute more effectively to success. Additionally, emotional intelligence is a key predictor of job and organizational performance, particularly when fostered through individual performance, including task-related and contextual factors (Baporikar, 2020). This is particularly relevant for leaders in smart cities, where effective leadership is crucial for urban transformation.

Emotional intelligence significantly influences employee performance by improving emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and response to workplace challenges, thereby enhancing productivity and organizational effectiveness (Sharmin et al., 2024). The results demonstrate that emotional intelligence impacts both individual and organizational outcomes. Given its importance for personal and organizational

success, integrating emotional intelligence into organizational practices is essential for fostering a high-performance work environment (Goleman, 2001). Research indicates that emotional intelligence is not crucial for transactional leaders but contributes to improved communication and team management (Harms & Crede, 2010). The influence of emotional intelligence on communication has been confirmed in organizations in Serbia, as studies show a statistically significant impact of emotional intelligence on communication satisfaction within organizations in Serbia (Nikolić et al., 2014).

For all the above reasons, this paper aims to highlight the significance of emotional intelligence especially its impact on leaders in smart cities. Additionally, the paper points to the significance of emotional intelligence among leaders within organizations in Serbia. The results of the research should provide important guidelines for the strategic selection and development of leaders who will guide organizations in smart cities in Serbia.

3 METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted within organizations in Serbia and involved 256 participants. Responses were measured using a Likert scale. Transformational leadership behavior was assessed using the Transformational Leadership Behavior Inventory (TLI). TLI evaluates four dimensions: Core transformational leader behavior, High performance expectations, Supportive leader behavior, and Intellectual stimulation (Podsakoff et al., 1990; MacKenzie et al., 2001). These four dimensions were combined into a single construct representing transformational leadership. In this study,

transformational leadership behavior was measured using two dimensions: contingent reward behavior and contingent punishment behavior (MacKenzie et al., 2001). Furthermore, transformational leadership behavior was also analyzed as a single construct.

Financial performance was measured through a questionnaire encompassing seven indicators: Productivity, Profitability, Market share, Sales growth, Competitive status, Asset growth, and Salaries (Terek et al., 2016; Vukonjanski et al., 2016; Nikolić et al., 2015). In this study, these indicators are analyzed as a single dimension.

Emotional intelligence was measured using a questionnaire that assesses five dimensions: selfawareness, managing emotions, selfmotivation, Empathy, and Social skills (Weisinger, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, emotional intelligence is analyzed as a single construct.

4 RESULTS

This study analyzes the impact of emotional intelligence; however, the directions of its influence has not been examined. The primary objective is to determine whether emotional intelligence affects leadership in organizations in Serbia and to assess how this impact affects their economic performance. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1, which includes the dimension names, their corresponding abbreviations, minimum and maximum values, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Dimensions	Short name	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Core transformational leader behavior	L1	1.00	7.00	4.5283	1.78188	.931
High performance expectations	L2	1.00	7.00	5.4702	1.49075	.833
Supportive leader behavior	L3	1.00	7.00	3.5770	1.58519	.871
Intellectual stimulation	L4	1.00	7.00	4.1362	1.80259	.925
Contingent reward behavior	L5	1.00	7.00	4.2154	1.85478	.878
Contingent punishment behavior	L6	1.00	7.00	5.1429	1.73433	.883
Transformational Leadership	TF	1.29	7.00	4.3463	1.25849	.905
Transactional Leadership	TS	1.00	7.00	4.6129	1.38274	.794
Emotional intelligence	EI	1.00	5.00	3.9184	.58759	.924
Financial performance	FP	1.00	5.00	3.4547	.85090	.882

The correlation analysis examining the influence of emotional intelligence on leadership in organizations in Serbia is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 The impact of EI on leadership in Serbia

	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	TF	TS
EI	.303**	.328**	.134*	.227**	.191**	.170*	.316**	.237**

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To assess the impact of emotional intelligence, the overall sample was divided into two groups based on emotional intelligence levels: high and low. The effect of leadership on

economic performance in organizations in Serbia was analyzed within these sub-samples, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 The impact of leadership on economic performance in subsamples of low and high EI

EI_HL		L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	TF	TS
FP	L	.308**	.262**	.041	.185	.168	.122	.282**	.202*
	H	.370**	.428**	.352**	.434**	.409**	.125	.494**	.370**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*.Coreelation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

5 DISCUSSION

Emotional intelligence impacts all aspects of leadership in organizations in Serbia. The most significant impact of emotional intelligence is on High performance expectations behavior which can contribute to increased trust in employees and their abilities in the workplace. Additionally, emotional intelligence has a slightly stronger influence on transformational leadership behavior than on transactional leadership in organizations in Serbia. Transformational leadership has an additive effect even on transactional leadership. The effect of transformational leadership drives followers to achieve more than what is usually expected of them (Northouse, 2018).

In the high emotional intelligence subsample, all aspects of leadership have a statistically significant impact on economic performance except for Contingent punishment behavior. According to Podsakoff et al. (1982), a leader's use of contingent negative reinforcement involves responding to an employee's poor performance with actions like reprimands and expressions of disapproval. Considering the relatively low impact of emotional intelligence on Contingent punishment behavior in the global sample this relationship should be further examined.

In the low emotional intelligence subsample, both transformational and transactional leadership impact economic performance as well as Core transformational leader behavior and High performance expectations. In this study, Supportive leader behavior, Intellectual stimulation, Contingent reward behavior, and Contingent punishment behavior do not have an impact on economic performance in the low emotional intelligence subsample.

6 CONCLUSION

Enhancing emotional intelligence is crucial for leaders driving smart city initiatives. Higher levels of emotional intelligence among leaders will provides the self-awareness, selfregulation, and interpersonal skills necessary to navigate complex, people-centered urban transformations and lead organizations effectively in this specific environment. This is particularly important in the diverse European context and in regions such as Serbia, where the successful integration of smart technologies requires not only technical expertise but also the ability to engage, motivate, and align a broad range of stakeholders. By fostering emotionally intelligent leadership, smart cities can promote innovative, inclusive, and sustainable organizational practices, contributing to the development of urban environments that effectively address the evolving challenges of the smart city ecosystem.

Research findings indicate that emotional intelligence significantly influences all aspects of leadership in organizations in Serbia particularly through behaviors characterized by high performance expectations that reinforce trust in employees. Transformational leadership demonstrates a stronger impact in environments with high emotional intelligence. Conversely, in organizations with low emotional intelligence, only specific leadership practices affect economic performance, while behaviors such as providing support, intellectual stimulation, and contingent punishment exhibit no significant effect.

These results undermine the importance of cultivating emotional intelligence among leaders in Serbia. As research shows, these urban environments require agile and adaptive leadership and emotionally intelligent leaders are proven to be better equipped to navigate rapid technological advancements and engage diverse stakeholders. Leaders with increased emotional capacity are more likely to establish a strong foundation for fostering financial growth and sustainable development in smart cities.

A limitation of this study is that the obtained results are specific to enterprises in Serbia and stem from research that did not directly examine the development of smart cities in the country. According to the study by Prigoda et al. (2022), none of the major cities in Serbia are fully prepared for the urbanization process, despite governmental efforts toward the digitalization of urban areas and the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, recognizing the positive impact of smart city development on the national economy. This research explores advancements in the application of geographic information systems, the functioning of municipal services, and e-Government, as well as specific solutions already implemented. Several cities in Serbia have been identified as progressing toward becoming smart cities, including Niš, Kruševac, Pančevo, Zrenjanin, Novi Sad, and Belgrade (Prigoda et al., 2022). Given these findings, future research on smart city development should be conducted in cities in Serbia that are on the path to becoming smart cities. Additionally, the recommendation for organizations is to consider emotional intelligence as a factor in the selection of leaders in enterprises operating within these evolving smart city environments.

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