

Distributed Leadership and Emotional Intelligence in Managing Organizational Change

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>Organizational change has become a structural inevitability in contemporary institutions, driven by technological acceleration, global competitiveness, shifting regulatory demands, and evolving stakeholder expectations. This study interrogates the convergence of distributed leadership and emotional intelligence as mutually reinforcing frameworks capable of enhancing organisational adaptability and transforming how change is enacted and experienced. While distributed leadership decentralises authority and amplifies collective agency, emotional intelligence equips actors with the affective and interpersonal competencies necessary to interpret, regulate, and respond to the emotional complexities inherent in change processes. Through an integrative review of theoretical and empirical literature, the study reveals that despite the increasing recognition of these constructs, their intersection remains underexplored, particularly in non-instructional and administrative contexts. Findings indicate that emotional intelligence substantially mediates the effectiveness of distributed leadership by strengthening interpersonal trust, communicative coherence, and collaborative problem-solving. The study concludes that neither construct alone is sufficient for navigating the volatility of contemporary organisational environments. Rather, their synergistic application provides a robust, holistic paradigm for managing transformation in ways that are sustainable, participatory, and emotionally attuned.</i></p> <p>Keywords: distributed leadership, emotional intelligence, organisational change, collaboration, affective competencies, leadership practice, and adaptability.</p>
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Introduction

Organizational change has become an unavoidable reality in contemporary institutions, driven by both internal and external pressures that continuously reshape operational landscapes. Whether originating from technological advancement, competitive dynamics, policy shifts, or evolving stakeholder expectations, these pressures compel organizations to adapt or risk obsolescence. Consequently, organizational change is best understood as the deliberate and systematic alteration of key organizational components to enhance overall effectiveness. These components include mission and vision, strategic direction, goals, structure, systems, processes, technologies, and the people who animate the organization. When these elements are intentionally refined, organizations strengthen their

capacity to generate value and to deliver on the mandates for which they were established.

Organizational change, therefore, is neither accidental nor incidental. It is a purposeful and planned effort initiated by actors within the system who recognize the need to shift something relatively permanent in the organization's architecture. Such changes often involve formal modifications. Structural adjustments, process re-engineering, or redesign of reward systems and job roles represent concrete, visible, and easily identifiable forms of change. For example, work processes can be reorganized, new departments created, or reporting lines redesigned. These forms of change are tangible and lend themselves to clear documentation, implementation, and evaluation.

However, deeper and more abstract dimensions of organizational change, such as cultural transformation, are far more complex to initiate, implement, and sustain. Attempting to shift an organization from an authoritarian culture to a participative one requires far more than policy announcements or new strategic statements. It entails reconditioning deeply embedded assumptions, values, and behavioural norms, a process that is inherently demanding, iterative, and unpredictable. Thus, while strategy can be declared, culture must be cultivated.

In today's dynamic environment, change has become the prevailing condition rather than an exceptional occurrence. Organizations exist in a state of constant transition, with all members and functional units affected. The need for change often becomes evident when managers detect misalignment between organizational intentions and actual performance outcomes. When gaps emerge between what an organization aspires to achieve and what it is accomplishing, effective leaders view the management of change as a core responsibility, not a peripheral task. As several scholars argue, adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness are the hallmarks of organizations that successfully navigate growing competitive pressures. Consequently, managers must be prepared to address both planned and spontaneous forms of change, and leadership style becomes a central determinant of change success. Within this context, distributed leadership has gained prominence as a viable model.

Distributed leadership is conceptualized as a leadership approach that emphasizes practice rather than position. Rather than being tied exclusively to individuals in formal leadership roles, distributed leadership is enacted through the collective interactions among leaders, followers, and the organizational context. Although conceptually related to team leadership, shared leadership, and democratic leadership, distributed leadership is distinct in its emphasis on leadership as a relational and situational practice. Scholars such as Spillane (2005, 2006) assert that distributed leadership reframes the unit of analysis from individual leaders to leadership activities embedded in social interactions. Similarly, Leithwood, Mascall, and Strauss (2009) argue that leadership responsibility in this framework can be assumed by any member of the organization, regardless of rank, whenever the task requires it.

This model encourages the involvement of individuals with diverse skills, knowledge, and experiences in leadership tasks, thereby enhancing decision quality and organizational problem-solving capacity. Harris (2014) notes that distributed leadership fosters collaborative learning and builds capacity for sustainable improvement. When professionals work jointly on meaningful

organizational issues, the potential for deep learning and innovative solutions is significantly heightened. However, distributed leadership is not merely about increasing participation; it is about coordinating interdependent actions to produce collective agency. Scholars such as Ho and Ng (2017), as well as Tian, Risku, and Collin (2016), reaffirm that the essence of distributed leadership lies in the interplay of interactions, practices, and context rather than in the authority of individuals.

Parallel to the rising importance of distributed leadership is the growing recognition of emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical competency for navigating organizational change effectively. Rooted in human resource management and organizational behaviour, emotional intelligence focuses on the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in oneself and in others. Since its introduction by Salovey and Mayer (1990), EI has evolved into a fundamental determinant of workplace performance, interpersonal relations, and leadership effectiveness. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), emotional intelligence enables individuals to discern emotional signals, interpret them appropriately, and harness this understanding to guide thought and behaviour. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to manage conflict, inspire cooperation, navigate uncertainty, and influence others constructively, competencies that are indispensable during organizational change.

Employees can cultivate higher emotional intelligence by developing emotional awareness, adaptive thinking, and an improved capacity for empathetic engagement. Workers who strengthen these skills tend to exhibit more positive attitudes, greater motivation, and stronger organizational commitment. Training initiatives can significantly enhance emotional intelligence, resulting in improved customer satisfaction, stronger teamwork, and heightened job performance. Goleman (1995, 1996) suggests that individuals with high EI are distinctive in their self-awareness and their ability to sense and respond to the emotions of others, making them particularly effective in leadership positions that require social sensitivity.

Despite its recognized importance, gaps remain in organizational practice, particularly in translating theoretical insights on emotional intelligence into managerial strategies. Many organizations struggle to implement emotional intelligence frameworks effectively due to increasing complexity in the business environment, globalization, workforce diversity, and rising turnover rates. These challenges highlight the necessity of integrating emotional intelligence into leadership development, particularly in contexts where change is constant and employee resilience is crucial.

In summary, both distributed leadership and emotional intelligence offer valuable lenses for understanding and managing organizational change. Distributed leadership expands the leadership capacity of organizations by leveraging collective expertise, while emotional intelligence equips individuals with the emotional competencies necessary to navigate complex human dynamics. Together, these constructs provide a robust foundation for leading transformational change in modern organizations.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary organizations operate in environments characterized by rapid change, heightened uncertainty, and intensifying competitive pressures. As institutions strive to remain effective and relevant, they are compelled to alter various organizational components, ranging from structures and processes to strategies, technologies, and cultures. However, while the necessity of organizational change is widely acknowledged, many organizations continue to struggle with its successful implementation. Evidence suggests that a significant number of change initiatives fail or produce only marginal improvements because the human and relational dimensions of change are not adequately addressed.

Central to this challenge is the persistence of traditional, leader-centric models of change management, which concentrate authority and decision-making within a narrow group of individuals. Such models are increasingly insufficient in complex organizational environments where expertise is dispersed and where meaningful change requires collective ownership. Distributed leadership has emerged as a promising alternative, emphasizing shared responsibility, collaborative problem-solving, and the activation of leadership practice across all levels of the organization. Yet, despite its potential, distributed leadership remains underutilized in many organizational settings, partly due to limited conceptual clarity and inadequate integration into change management frameworks.

Compounding this limitation is the insufficient incorporation of emotional intelligence in leadership practices. Organizational change often evokes anxiety, resistance, uncertainty, and interpersonal tensions. Leaders who lack emotional intelligence may misinterpret employee reactions, communicate ineffectively, or fail to foster the psychological safety necessary for successful change adoption. Although emotional intelligence has been recognized as a critical determinant of effective leadership, many organizations do not intentionally develop or assess emotional intelligence competencies among managers and change agents. As a result, leaders are often ill-equipped to

guide employees through the emotional complexities that accompany organizational transformation.

Moreover, empirical gaps persist, particularly in contexts such as Malta, where limited research has explored the combined influence of distributed leadership and emotional intelligence on managing organizational change. In a rapidly evolving global environment marked by increasing diversity, workforce mobility, mergers, acquisitions, and shifting organizational expectations, such gaps hinder leadership effectiveness and organizational resilience.

Thus, the problem this study addresses is the insufficient understanding and application of distributed leadership and emotional intelligence as complementary frameworks for managing organizational change. Without integrating these two critical dimensions, organizations remain vulnerable to ineffective change processes, reduced employee commitment, and ultimately, diminished organizational performance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how distributed leadership and emotional intelligence jointly influence the effectiveness of organizational change management. The study seeks to deepen understanding of the interplay between leadership practices and emotional competencies in shaping employee responses, enhancing collaboration, and improving overall change outcomes.

Literature Review

This chapter presents a rigorous and integrative examination of the scholarship that informs the nexus between distributed leadership and emotional intelligence in the governance of organisational change. It interrogates the conceptual foundations and empirical insights surrounding these constructs, elucidating how dispersed leadership agency, collaborative judgment, and emotionally attuned competencies, such as self-awareness, regulation of affect, and empathic discernment, shape organisational adaptability, communicative coherence, and behavioural responsiveness during periods of transition. Although distributed leadership has increasingly been recognised as a collective, fluid, and contextually adaptive model capable of addressing the intricacies of contemporary organisational environments, its efficacy is progressively understood to hinge on the emotional acuity of those who participate in its practice. Yet, despite growing interest, the literature reveals a notable paucity of research exploring the integrated, mutually reinforcing role of emotional intelligence within distributed leadership architectures, particularly beyond traditional instructional or educational contexts. This chapter seeks to address this scholarly gap by synthesising dominant theoretical perspectives, critically appraising current models, and

delineating areas where further inquiry is both warranted and compelling.

Theories of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a pivotal paradigm for interpreting how leaders and teams navigate intricate social dynamics, especially amid organisational transformation. Salovey and Mayer (1990) conceived EI as a cognitive capacity encompassing the perception, interpretation, and regulation of emotions within oneself and others. Their four-branch model, emotional perception, emotional facilitation, emotional understanding, and emotional regulation, provides an analytical framework for examining how emotional competence shapes relational behaviour and leadership judgement.

Goleman (1998) broadened this perspective through his mixed model, which integrates five behavioural competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social aptitude. In contrast to Salovey and Mayer's ability-oriented construct, Goleman's approach blends emotional skills with dispositional and behavioural elements.

Petrides (2009) later advanced the Trait EI model, framing emotional intelligence as a cluster of enduring self-perceptions rooted in personality. This view positions EI as a relatively stable disposition rather than a skill set that can be easily cultivated.

Distributed Leadership: Origins and Practice

Distributed leadership (DL) emerged as a counterpoint to traditional hierarchical models that place disproportionate weight on singular authority. In contemporary, knowledge-intensive institutions, such as universities, leadership confined to one individual often proves insufficient for navigating rapid transitions. DL reframes leadership as a shared, relational, and context-responsive endeavour enacted by multiple actors across an organisation (Spillane, 2006; Gronn, 2002).

Spillane (2006), one of the principal theorists of DL, characterises it as a leadership practice "stretched" across leaders, followers, and the situational context. Rooted in activity theory and distributed cognition, his model underscores the interplay between individuals, organisational routines, and mediating tools. Rather than centring formal role-holders, Spillane's framework highlights how leadership emerges collaboratively through everyday interactions. This perspective aligns directly with the present study's interest in how distributed leadership practices facilitate the management of organisational change.

Emotional Intelligence and Change Leadership

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become widely acknowledged as a decisive factor in shaping effective leadership during organisational change. Because change invariably introduces uncertainty and emotional tension, leaders with strong EI are better positioned to manage both the operational demands and the affective responses of their teams. Clarke (2010) argues that EI reinforces transformational leadership by enabling leaders to communicate vision, inspire confidence, and support followers through emotionally attuned behaviour. Three competencies, self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, play a central role in shaping how leaders interpret change, address resistance, and build trust within distributed leadership environments.

Self-awareness enables leaders to recognise their emotional patterns and understand how these influence group dynamics. This competence is especially vital at the outset of change, as reflected in Kotter's (1996) early stages of establishing urgency and assembling a guiding coalition. Leaders who exhibit genuine self-awareness convey authenticity and credibility, strengthening collective commitment. Empirical evidence from Hur et al. (2011) affirms that leaders with high emotional clarity mobilise stronger dedication from team members during change efforts.

Self-regulation, the discipline to manage disruptive impulses, is essential during the execution of change. Armenakis and Harris (2009) contend that credible change agents demonstrate consistency, fairness, and behavioural integrity, qualities that are reinforced by emotional self-control. In distributed leadership contexts, where authority is shared rather than centralised, the ability to regulate emotion becomes even more crucial. Individuals across the organisation must navigate ambiguity, conflict, and informal leadership expectations while sustaining collaboration and forward momentum (Clarke, 2010; Hur et al., 2011).

Empathy, the most relational aspect of EI, is indispensable for recognising and responding to the emotional realities of those undergoing change. Kotter's (1996) emphasis on empowerment and consolidation requires leaders to acknowledge concerns, interpret emotional cues, and cultivate a supportive climate. Armenakis and Harris (2009) similarly highlight that shared understanding and meaning-making are foundational to successful transformation. Within distributed leadership systems, empathy ensures coherence by allowing leaders at multiple levels to align perspectives and reduce fragmentation. Thus, EI functions as a stabilising mechanism that strengthens distributed leadership and enhances adaptive capacity during organisational change.

Intersections Between Emotional Intelligence and Distributed Leadership

The convergence of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Distributed Leadership (DL) forms a pivotal foundation for strengthening organisational adaptability, communication coherence, and relational stability during periods of change. Although both concepts have been extensively studied in isolation, contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that emotionally intelligent behaviour is indispensable for the successful enactment of distributed leadership in dynamic environments (Clarke, 2010; Hur, van den Berg, & Wilderom, 2011; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002).

Because DL disperses authority across multiple individuals and units (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013), it depends heavily on interpersonal trust, reciprocal influence, and collective decision-making. EI supplies the intrapersonal and social capacities, self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, required to sustain these collaborative demands (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). In the absence of EI, shared leadership is prone to conflict, misalignment, and breakdowns in communication.

Empirical research reinforces this interdependence. Hur et al. (2011) show that key transformational leadership outcomes, such as team responsiveness and performance, are significantly shaped by leaders' emotional management and perspective-taking abilities. Clarke (2010) likewise observes that project leaders with strong EI excel in harmonising distributed teams and mediating conflict, thereby enhancing adaptability during organisational transitions. These findings indicate that emotionally intelligent actors are better equipped to navigate the tensions, ambiguity, and resistance commonly associated with change.

Empathy, a central dimension of EI, is particularly vital in DL settings. Because horizontal leadership operates without strong formal authority, influence is exercised through relationships rather than hierarchy. Leaders must listen attentively, anticipate emotional reactions, and respond with sensitivity to cultivate trust and maintain alignment (Bolden et al., 2009; Clarke, 2010). During change, when uncertainty heightens emotional volatility, leaders who lack empathy risk misreading group dynamics and fuelling resistance. Thus, empathy is not an optional virtue but a functional requirement for sustaining cohesion in distributed systems.

Communication effectiveness, essential to any change process, also relies heavily on EI. While DL diversifies communication channels, EI ensures that exchanges remain clear, equitable, and emotionally grounded. Leaders with high EI can adapt messages to varied audiences, manage emotional tension in discussions, and de-escalate emerging

conflicts, capacities integral to maintaining coherence across dispersed leadership structures (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Without these competencies, communication becomes fragmented, undermining coordination and responsiveness.

Although some interpretations of DL emphasise structural design as the principal driver of shared leadership (Spillane, 2006), such views overlook the emotional dimension of leadership practice. Because leadership is enacted in relationships, and relationships are inherently emotional, EI is not a peripheral add-on but a foundational mechanism enabling DL to operate effectively amid organisational change (Kezar, 2011).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Although Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Distributed Leadership (DL) have each attracted substantial scholarly interest, research integrating both constructs within organisational change, particularly in higher education, remains sparse (Bolden et al., 2009; Clarke, 2010; Gronn, 2008; Spillane, 2006). Much of the EI literature concentrates on individual capabilities situated within hierarchical leadership structures (Goleman, 1998; Jordan & Troth, 2011), whereas DL scholarship typically addresses shared influence in instructional or pedagogical environments (Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2009). These two bodies of work rarely converge.

Empirical examinations of how specific EI competencies, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy, shape leadership behaviour when authority is dispersed across teams are limited (Crawford, 2012; Bryson et al., 2015). Similarly, little is known about how emotional competence supports collaboration under non-hierarchical or networked change arrangements. Dominant change leadership frameworks, including Kotter (1996) and Armenakis and Harris (2009), presuppose centralised control and thus provide minimal insight into the emotional demands of distributed leadership (Kezar, 2011).

Another gap concerns the narrow scope of DL applications within higher education. Most studies centre on curriculum leadership or faculty development (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006), offering little empirical evidence regarding how emotionally intelligent distributed leadership functions in administrative change processes, such as organisational restructuring or institutional relocations.

Conclusion

The evolving complexity of organisational life underscores the necessity of leadership models that transcend hierarchical rigidity and privilege collective intelligence. This study demonstrates that distributed leadership and emotional intelligence operate most powerfully when

conceptualised as interdependent rather than discrete frameworks. Distributed leadership broadens the leadership landscape by recognising the multiplicity of actors who contribute to organisational direction and decision-making. However, its success is contingent upon emotionally intelligent behaviours that foster trust, mitigate conflict, and sustain interpersonal coherence.

Emotional intelligence, in turn, provides the affective infrastructure that enables actors within distributed networks to navigate ambiguity, interpret emotional cues, and cultivate psychologically safe environments, conditions indispensable for effective collaboration during change. Without emotional intelligence, distributed leadership risks degenerating into fragmented authority or performative participation. Conversely, emotional intelligence devoid of distributed structures remains confined to individual influence rather than organisational transformation.

The evidence therefore suggests that the intersection of distributed leadership and emotional intelligence offers a superior lens for understanding and managing organisational change. It supports richer communication, enhances responsiveness, and empowers diverse organisational members to engage meaningfully with the demands of transition. As change becomes increasingly multidimensional, leaders must embrace this integrated paradigm to foster resilience, strengthen collective agency, and actualize sustainable change outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Institutionalize Emotional Intelligence Development: Organisations should embed emotional intelligence training in leadership development programmes, with an emphasis on self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathic competence as prerequisites for effective distributed leadership practice.
2. Adopt Distributed Leadership Architectures: Structured opportunities should be created for shared decision-making and collaborative problem-solving, ensuring that leadership responsibilities are not confined to positional authority but are dispersed across competent actors.
3. Integrate EI Metrics into Change Management Frameworks: Change management models should include explicit assessment of emotional readiness, stakeholder concerns, and interpersonal dynamics to better anticipate resistance and support psychological safety.
4. Enhance Communication Channels: Organisations should strengthen communication mechanisms that promote transparency, dialogue, and feedback loops,

enabling emotionally intelligent interactions across distributed teams.

5. Promote Research in Non-Instructional Contexts: Future studies should examine the interplay of emotional intelligence and distributed leadership in diverse organisational environments beyond traditional educational settings to broaden theoretical and practical insight.
6. Strengthen Organisational Culture for Collaboration: Leaders should cultivate cultures that reward cooperation, mutual respect, and shared accountability, ensuring that distributed leadership is not merely structural but deeply embedded in organisational norms.

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