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# Emotional Intelligence and Transformational Leadership in the AEC Industry: Exploring Traits of Effective Leadership

Kimberly Smith, Dr. Sanjeev Adhikari  
Kennesaw State University

This study investigates the psychological competencies required for effective leadership within the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (AEC) industry, with a particular focus on emotional intelligence (EI) and transformational leadership. Recognizing that leadership significantly influences organizational performance, this research aims to identify traits that promote collaboration, innovation, and team cohesion in project-based environments. Drawing from established psychological theories and leadership models, this study examines how leadership is perceived across different organizational roles and experience levels. Using a survey platform called Qualtrics, a survey questionnaire was distributed to approximately 1,000 students and faculty members in the Construction Management and Architecture Department at Kennesaw State University. Of the responses received, 22 participants who are currently working in the AEC industry provided insights into their understanding of EI and leadership practices. The findings support that emotional intelligence, particularly interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, alongside transformational leadership behaviors, are widely regarded as essential qualities for effective leadership in the AEC sector. These results offer practical implications for leadership development, emphasizing the importance of soft skills and emotional awareness in fostering high-performing teams and resilient organizations.

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence (EI), Transformational Leadership, AEC Industry, Leadership Effectiveness, Interpersonal Skills, Intrapersonal Skills

## Introduction

Leadership is a critical factor that distinguishes individuals in professional environments, particularly in the AEC industry, where leadership directly influences both project outcomes and organizational performance (Kukah et al., 2021). Emotional Intelligence, a concept developed by psychologists, has emerged as a key attribute of effective leadership, enhancing interpersonal relationships and decision-making capabilities (Songer et al., 2006). The purpose of this research is to identify the traits and competencies that define successful leaders in the AEC industry and to determine whether certain characteristics correlate to effective leadership outcomes for both teams and projects. To achieve this, this study investigates potential knowledge gaps in EI and leadership understanding across industry generations. Perceptions of leadership may vary based on age, experience, and organizational role, and this was further investigated in the survey. This pilot study was created to answer the central question of what are the qualities of an effective leader in the AEC industry? To start, it is

hypothesized that individuals under the age of 45 will demonstrate greater knowledge of emotional intelligence and leadership competencies compared to their older counterparts.

In conducting this study, several research gaps were identified. First, the limited sample size restricts the ability to generalize findings across the broader AEC industry. Second, the sample was drawn from a single university-affiliated population, introducing potential selection bias and limiting industry-wide representation. Third, there is a scarcity of empirical research explicitly examining the intersection of EI, transformational leadership, and leadership effectiveness within the AEC sector. These gaps highlight the need for exploratory research to inform future, larger-scale studies and guide the development of evidence-based leadership training programs specific to the industry.

### **Literature Review**

Through the use of Google Scholar, Research Gate, and some other lesser-known literary peer-reviewed article platforms, research papers were collected and reviewed to gain a better understanding of EI and transformational leadership. The review of these literary articles helped to further define what skills are needed for a leader to possess in the AEC industry in order to be effective in their position. Each article has been reviewed for its main findings, methodology, and application to the industry and correlation to the overall survey conducted in this experiment.

#### *Emotional Intelligence*

In the 1990's the concept of emotional intelligence was refined to show that there is more to an individual than just their intellectual quotient (IQ) (Batool, 2013). Emotional intelligence is a key defining feature of a manager, since having this skill ensures that leaders make result-oriented decisions and turn those decisions into positive outcomes for their organization (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021). EI encompasses both interpersonal and intrapersonal skill sets, which together contribute to successful leaders. Interpersonal skills are a piece of emotional intelligence that focuses on what is known as "soft skills" (Kukah et al., 2021). Soft skills are the non-technical skills that include the ability to work cohesively in a team, trustworthiness of an individual, and the ability to interpret emotions in order to evaluate a situation and respond effectively (Kukah et al., 2021). To accompany interpersonal skills are intrapersonal skills, which are the ability for an individual to manage, understand internal feelings, and regulate their internal emotions when approaching a situation (Molineux, 2017). Those leaders with greater EI ratings are highly conscious of emotional states, slight annoyances, and stressors, and can identify whether those emotions are relevant to the decisions being made (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021). Leaders with strong intrapersonal skills are better equipped to manage stress, adapt to dynamic project demands, and make thoughtful decisions under pressure. Additionally, the authors found a strong connection between being proactive and the ability to self-manage, as well as the importance of sharing interests, open communication, and fostering opportunities for growth among team members to promote growth within the group. Other critical EI factors include being service-oriented, the ability to anticipate, recognize, and address clients and team members needs before they are vocalized as well as having organizational awareness (Butler & Chinowsky, 2006). Together, these elements highlighted in the literary review show the importance of cultivating emotional intelligence as a foundational competency in training sessions for effective and sustainable leadership in project and team management. The integration of these EI dimensions reinforces this study's focus on identifying leadership traits that extend beyond technical expertise.

The author, Cherniss (2000), explores the concept of EI, its historical development, definitions, measurement approaches, and EI's significance in professional settings. Various assessment tools, including self-evaluated questionnaires and performance-based measures, have been developed to

evaluate EI in individuals. Research suggests that higher EI is associated with better job performance, effective leadership, and organizational productivity. For example, leaders with high EI are better equipped to handle stress, inspire teams, and navigate complex social interactions (Cherniss, 2000). This study shows that incorporating EI training programs can enhance a leader's ability to further connect and manage team members, manage stress, resolve conflict, adapt to change, and navigate complex issues in the workplace.

Previous studies were conducted to correlate the relationship between organizational leaders' age and their emotional intelligence level, which provides a theoretical foundation for this study's hypothesis. Alzoubi and Aziz (2021) found that younger leaders with moderate to high EI demonstrated more balanced decision-making approaches, while older leaders with lower EI tended to be more risk-averse and less open to alternative perspectives. These findings are particularly relevant to the AEC industry, where leaders must frequently navigate uncertainty, time constraints, and interdisciplinary coordination on the job.

### *Transformational Leadership*

To accompany emotional intelligence, studies have identified two types of leadership styles. These leadership styles have been classified as transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Batool, 2013). Butler and Chinowsky (2006) define transformational leadership within the AEC industry as the demonstration of emotionally driven behaviors such as the ability to influence, motivate, and intellectually stimulate others. A transformational leader tends to motivate and stimulate group interest, being inspirational, and prioritizing the group's needs over self-interest, while transactional leadership can discipline or reward based on performance, competency, and accomplishments (Batool, 2013). In the AEC industry, transactional leadership can be observed on the jobsite since speed and efficiency are highly rewarded in the industry. For the purposes of this paper, the focus between the two will be on transformational leadership styles and its application in the AEC industry due to the style's soft nature and more personalized approach.

"*Emotional Intelligence (EI) Research in the Construction Industry: A Review and Future Directions*" by Kukah et al. (2021) provides a comprehensive review of EI research within the construction sector. This author's study found that emotional intelligence enhances transformational leadership styles and contributes to resilience against stress, and enhances stress tolerance among construction professionals. This study further shows that EI is not just a trait but a skill that can be learned and developed over time. By cultivating and working to enhance EI within an individual, an effective leadership team is created that fosters success in complex organizational situations. Kukah et al. (2021) study also stresses that having more complex understandings of EI can lead to more effective communication, empathy, and precise decision-making, creating a more harmonious and productive workplace environment. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that integrating emotional intelligence into professional development strategies can be essential for fostering adaptive, empathetic, and effective leadership in the construction industry.

The article "*Emotional Intelligence and Effective Leadership*" by Palmer et al. (2001) investigates the relationship between EI and effective leadership, particularly focusing on transformational leadership styles. The authors, through a survey questionnaire, found that emotional intelligence can be correlated to transformational leadership. After a thorough review of the data collected, managers with higher EI are shown to be more likely to exhibit transformational leadership behaviors (Palmer et al. 2001). The data collected helped to show the correlation between successful, effective leadership and the influence on how leaders monitor and respond to their subordinates, impacting the overall work environment.

Leadership is a dynamic and interactive social behavior shaped by motivation, values and context (Murphy et al., 2023). Research has shown that leadership is a skill that can be learned, developed, and refined over time. To enhance leadership, training programs can be derived from a clear understanding of the leadership requirements of the specific AEC sector. Studies indicate that leadership behavior depends on factors that include cultural settings, projects being managed, employees and team members, as well as project urgency (Murphy et al., 2023). Effective leadership is a key factor in ensuring an organization has teams that stay motivated to achieve an atmosphere of innovation and success. In a study of over 975 individuals, data found that transactional leadership styles tend to be the most effective, while in project management settings, democratic leadership styles tend to be the style of leadership individuals lean towards (Murphy et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of adapting leadership styles to specific project environments and team dynamics in order to cultivate high-performing, motivated teams within the construction industry.

Research indicates that transformational leadership is closely associated with positive individual and organizational outcomes, including increased motivation, trust, and professional growth (Anwar, 2017). Studies further demonstrate that non-technical skills such as teamwork trustworthiness, and emotional awareness, are an asset to have within an organization's leadership team (Kukah et al., 2021). AEC firms have worked to develop and implement various innovative, evidence-based training courses and strategic planning to further support and advance leadership members to allow for continued growth and development (Cheung et al., 2023). These developments underscore the relevance of examining how EI and transformational leadership intersect within the AEC industry.

#### *Literary Implications for This Study*

The survey findings from this pilot study largely align with the existing literature that identifies emotional intelligence and transformational leadership as central qualities of an effective leader within the AEC industry. Prior research has consistently emphasized interpersonal skills, empathy, emotional regulation, and adaptability as defining leadership competencies (Butler & Chinowsky, 2006; Cherniss, 2000; Kukah et al., 2021). These attributes were also reflected in the perceptions of leadership effectiveness expressed by survey respondents. Survey responses related to leadership traits further reinforce the relevance of transformational leadership identified in the literature. Nearly all respondents agreed that effective leaders must be innovative, open-minded, and willing to take ownership of situations. These traits closely correspond to transformational leadership behaviors described by Palmer et al. (2001) and Butler and Chinowsky (2006), including intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation. The unanimity of agreement on innovation and open-mindedness suggests strong industry-wide alignment with transformational leadership ideals, regardless of age or experience level.

Taken together, the survey findings confirm and extend existing literature by demonstrating that emotional intelligence and transformational leadership traits are widely perceived as essential to effective leadership in the AEC industry. The results also partially support the study's hypothesis that younger individuals exhibit greater awareness of emotional intelligence, while highlighting a critical opportunity for industry-wide leadership development initiatives. By empirically linking EI awareness, leadership perceptions, and generational differences, this study contributes practical evidence to ongoing discussions regarding leadership effectiveness and professional development in the AEC sector. However, gaps remain in understanding how these traits are perceived across industry generations and experience levels. By examining EI awareness, leadership perceptions, and age-related differences, this study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge and help shape future leadership training.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### *Methodology*

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine perceptions of emotional intelligence (EI) and transformational leadership within the AEC industry. A survey-based approach using a secure online survey platform, Qualtrics, over a one-month timeframe was selected to efficiently capture self-reported leadership perceptions across varied experience levels. Given the limited empirical research integrating EI and transformational leadership in the AEC context, this research was conducted as a pilot study, intended to identify preliminary trends and inform future large-scale investigations.

Participants were drawn from a single university, consisting of students, faculty, and professionals connected to the Construction Management and Architecture Departments at Kennesaw State University. Approximately 1,000 individuals were invited to participate, yielding 80 total responses (8% response rate). A screening question restricted further participation in the survey, in which participants were required to note if they were currently employed in the construction industry, and those reporting partial or no industry involvement were excluded from continuing further with the study. Of those 38 who indicated industry experience, only 22 respondents completed all substantive survey questions. This attrition reflects typical response fatigue in voluntary online surveys and represents a limitation in statistical power. Although limited in reliable response numbers, the completed responses provide sufficient depth for exploration trend analysis.

The questionnaire was designed based on themes identified in the literature review and assessed Emotional Intelligence and leadership perceptions. Items addressed in the survey revolve around Interpersonal Skills, Intrapersonal Skills, Adaptability, Stress Management, and General Mood. Additional survey questions were asked that were specifically related to transformational leadership behaviors. The demographic questions regarding gender, age range, and years of industry experience were included to contextualize leadership and emotional intelligence perceptions and to assess whether these perceptions varied by professional maturity or demographic characteristics. Understanding these relationships is central to the study's primary research objective: identifying traits associated with effective leadership in the AEC industry.

Survey data were exported from Qualtrics and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, means, medians, and modes. Cross-tabulations were used to explore relationships between demographic variables like age, experience, organizational role and leadership or EI awareness. Visual analyses were employed to illustrate observed trends. Due to the limited sample size, inferential statistical testing was restricted, and results are interpreted as exploratory. Accordingly, reliability measures such as Cronbach's alpha were not calculated, as the primary objective was trend identification rather than psychometric validation. To try to avoid some bias, various question responses were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, supplemented by demographic and binary response items

While this sampling approach provided access to industry-engaged respondents, it introduces selection bias and limits industry-wide representativeness. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was implied through survey completion. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were reported in aggregate form. The study posed minimal risk and adhered to standard ethical guidelines for human-subject research.

This study has several limitations. The small sample size, single-institution sampling frame, and self-reported data constrain generalizability and increase the potential for selection and response bias. The university-affiliated population may overrepresent individuals with greater exposure to EI concepts, limits in the age grouping of the survey population and truly limits broader industry application. Additionally, the adapted survey instrument limits psychometric rigor. Despite these constraints, the study provides meaningful preliminary insights and establishes a foundation for future research employing expanded samples, validated instruments, and inferential analyses.

#### *Demographics Analysis*

This study's survey generated a gender distribution of 60% male, 35% female, and one non-binary respondent, which reflects the historically male-dominated composition of the AEC industry, as documented in prior research. The age distribution of the data collected was skewed toward early-career professionals, with 50% of respondents between 20–30 years old and a mean age of 34.7 years. These statistical results can be expected due to the sampling of a university campus.

A clear relationship emerged when analyzing responses to two survey questions: “What age range best represents you?” and “Which position most closely aligns with the current position you hold within your firm?” Figure 1 visually breaks out this association, indicating a positive relationship between age and position within an organization. While this correlation is expected, its relevance lies in reinforcing the developmental nature of leadership in the AEC industry, where experience remains a primary pathway to leadership responsibility. This finding aligns with Murphy et al. (2023), who

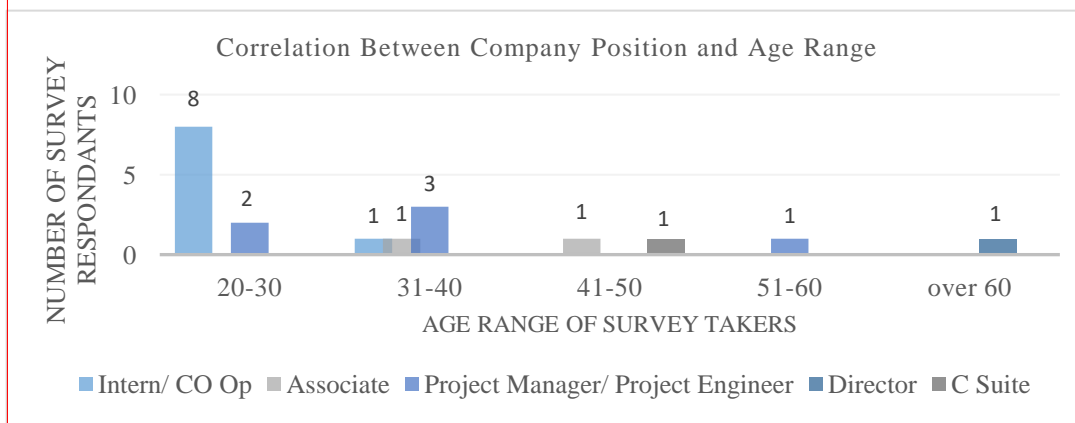


Figure 1. A visual breakdown of the correlation between company position and age range

emphasize that leadership effectiveness in construction is shaped by contextual experience and project exposure rather than solely by formal training.

To assess baseline awareness of emotional intelligence, participants were asked: “Are you aware that EI consists of five key areas, Interpersonal Skills, Intrapersonal Skills, Adaptability, Stress Management, and General Mood?” Of the 22 answers, 16 individuals (72.73%) indicated awareness of EI and its components, while 6 individuals (27.27%) were unfamiliar with the concept. Figure 2 demonstrates the informal relationship between knowledge of emotional intelligence and age range.

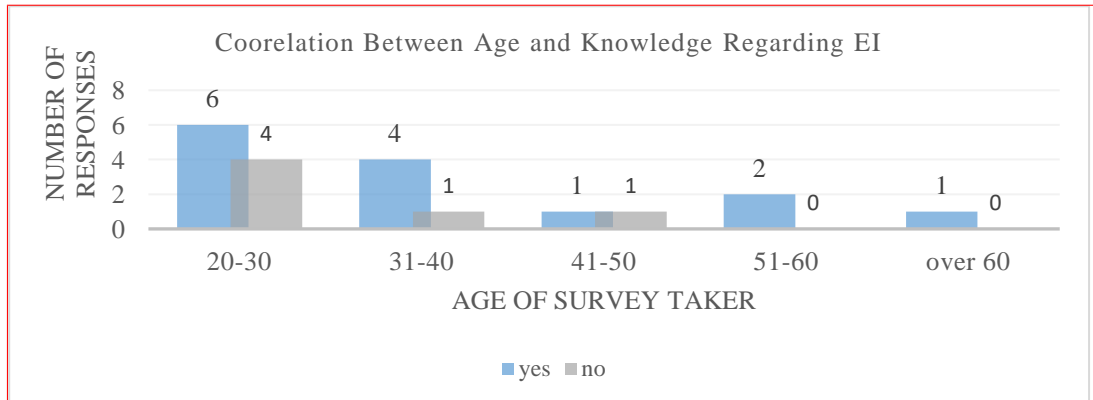


Figure 2. A graph displaying the correlation between survey participants' age and their knowledge of EI

It is important to note that while no statistically significant correlation was found between age and EI awareness, a trend emerged in which respondents with greater industry experience were slightly less familiar with formal EI terminology. This trend directly supports previous research of EI awareness as a critical leadership capability from past studies. Kukah et al.'s (2021) study was supported in that the results confirmed the authors' conclusion that EI is increasingly recognized within the construction industry as a necessary leadership competency rather than a supplementary skill. This study's results show that one-quarter of respondents reported unfamiliarity with EI, highlighting a persistent knowledge gap, reinforcing Butler and Chinowsky's (2006) assertion that a greater emphasis on EI training is still required within the industry.

#### *Leadership Awareness Trends and Emotional Intelligence Correlations*

Another question posed to participants was: "Does the ability to critically analyze situations determine whether an individual should be considered a leader?" Of the 22 participants, 18 individuals (81.81%) answered Yes, while 3 (13.64%) responded No, and one did not respond to the question. A correlation analysis between these responses and age range revealed a trend: younger respondents were more likely to associate critical thinking with leadership, whereas older participants were more likely to disagree. This data trend is also consistent with Alzoubi and Aziz (2021), who stated that younger respondents were more likely to associate critical thinking, adaptability, and open-mindedness with effective leadership. These findings support the research question by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness does not just encompass technical competencies but also includes higher emotional and cognitive proficiency.

Additional survey questions explored broader leadership traits. When asked whether a leader should be innovative and open-minded to be effective, all respondents unanimously agreed. This finding confirms prior research by Batool (2013) and Kukah et al. (2021), which identifies transformational leadership as conducive to innovation, motivation, and team cohesion. The data further suggest that transformational leadership behaviors are not only theoretically relevant but practically valued by industry professionals.

Beyond formal education, respondents were asked to advise if they have taken any online training, classroom-style instruction, apprenticeships, and certification programs to obtain additional industry knowledge. A comparison between age range and participation in additional training revealed that

Older respondents were more likely to have completed multiple certifications or training courses. Of the 22 responses, 7 individuals (31.82%) reported no additional training beyond higher education, another 7 (31.82%) had completed one to three courses, and 8 individuals (36.36%) had taken more than three courses. Older respondents were more likely to report completing multiple professional certifications or training programs, yet this did not correspond with higher EI awareness. This finding complements the earlier observation regarding EI awareness that experienced professionals may engage extensively in technical training, but formal emotional intelligence and leadership development may be underrepresented. This supports Kukah et al. (2021), who argue that EI is a learnable skill and should be more deliberately integrated into leadership training within the construction industry. This underscores the need for leadership programs that intentionally incorporate EI and transformational leadership competencies alongside technical training.

Survey responses consistently emphasized the importance of interpersonal (soft skills) and intrapersonal (self-regulation and self-awareness) competencies. One respondent noted that leaders with strong interpersonal skills “can cater to their team’s needs,” while another emphasized that such skills “increase productivity, mood, and overall wellbeing.” Intrapersonal skills, including emotional regulation, self-awareness, and time management, were also viewed as critical. Participants stressed the importance of leaders being able to manage their own emotions and understand their strengths and limitations. One respondent stated, “A leader must be able to regulate their own emotions and understand their strengths and weaknesses before leading others.” Another emphasized that prioritizing tasks and recognizing personal limits contributes to smoother project execution and reduced stress. These findings directly address the research question by identifying specific EI dimensions that contribute to effective leadership in the AEC industry. These results confirm prior findings by Butler and Chinowsky (2006) and Palmer et al. (2001), who identify interpersonal competence and emotional self-management as foundational to transformational leadership behaviors. The convergence of survey data and existing literature strengthens the argument that EI-related skills are not supplementary but essential leadership attributes in project-driven environments.

Collectively, these findings lean towards answering the research question by identifying emotional intelligence traits, particularly interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and transformational leadership behaviors as defining qualities of effective leadership in the AEC industry. The results of the preliminary study largely confirm the existing literature and highlight the generational differences in leadership perceptions and persistent gaps in EI focused training. This study also reinforces the growing consensus that effective leadership requires a balanced integration of technical competence, emotional awareness, and adaptive leadership behaviors.

## Discussion

In the quest to answer the research question, survey participants helped to determine that effective leadership is characterized by a combination of various EI competencies and transformational leadership behaviors. While respondents expressed mixed views on whether AEC leadership requires skills distinct from those used in other industries, qualitative responses consistently emphasized the need for adaptability, emotional regulation, and communication in managing complex, fast-paced, and multidisciplinary project environments. Those who supported the need for specialized leadership cited the fast-paced, project-based nature of the industry and the complexity of multidisciplinary team dynamics. One participant noted that “a distinct type of skill is required to lead,” emphasizing the importance of managing time-sensitive schedules and coordinating across diverse disciplines. These perspectives suggest that while core leadership traits may be consistent across sectors, their application in AEC environments may require greater adaptability and emotional awareness. To further explore leadership traits, participants were asked about the importance of interpersonal skills,

commonly referred to as soft skills, in effective leadership. One participant noted that soft skills allow leaders to “understand the people they are leading” and “cater to their team’s needs.” Another emphasized that interpersonal skills “enable leaders to communicate clearly, build trust, and foster strong team relationships.” These insights reinforce the value of interpersonal skills in fostering effective leadership within the AEC industry.

Due to the limited survey time frame and sample location, there are a lot of shortfalls of this pilot study that should be expanded upon. Future research should expand the study sample beyond a university-affiliated population to include a broader cross-section of AEC professionals across organizations, regions, and career stages. Larger and more diverse samples would enable more robust statistical analysis and deeper exploration of generational differences in emotional intelligence awareness. Through partnerships with professional organizations, the ability to obtain a broader survey pool will allow for greater statistical analysis. Subsequent studies should examine why older professionals may be less familiar with EI as a formal construct, including potential differences in leadership education, organizational culture, or training exposure over time. Results from expanded future surveys may also be used to inform the development of targeted leadership training materials and professional development seminars, supporting evidence-based approaches to cultivating emotionally intelligent and effective leadership within the AEC industry.

### **Conclusion**

This pilot study highlighted the critical role of emotional intelligence and transformational leadership in shaping effective leadership within the AEC industry. Through a combination of literature review and survey analysis, the findings indicate that competencies such as interpersonal skills, adaptability, open-mindedness, and ownership of decision-making are widely perceived as essential leadership qualities. The findings suggest that while technical expertise remains important, soft skills and emotional awareness are equally vital for navigating the complex interpersonal dynamics of the AEC sector.

Demographic analysis revealed differences in emotional intelligence awareness across age and experience levels, with younger respondents reporting greater familiarity with EI concepts. Due to the small sample size of the survey, this pilot study was unable to confirm the hypothesis; however, trends in the data suggest the hypothesis could be confirmed with additional research. While leadership responsibility increased with age and role seniority, emotional intelligence awareness did not consistently align with tenure, supporting the view that leadership effectiveness is influenced by specific competencies rather than experience alone. The study also reveals generational and experiential differences in leadership perceptions, emphasizing the need for tailored leadership development programs that address both psychological competencies and industry-specific challenges. Ultimately, this research supports the integration of emotional intelligence and transformational leadership training into professional development strategies for current and aspiring leaders in the AEC industry. By cultivating these skills, organizations can enhance leadership effectiveness, improve project outcomes, and create more resilient and adaptive teams. Given the study’s limited sample size and single university-affiliated population, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and not representative of the broader AEC industry. Future studies should expand the survey pool to include a more diverse and industry-representative population beyond university-affiliated participants, allowing for stronger statistical analysis and broader generalizability.

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