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LEADERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND JOB SATISFACTION: A CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Job satisfaction is crucial for organizational success, and transformational leadership is widely recognized as a key driver. However, research has rarely explored how leaders' emotional intelligence (EI) might act as a bridge between these two factors, leaving a gap in understanding. This study investigates whether EI mediates the link between individualized consideration (a core aspect of transformational leadership) and job satisfaction. According to the Conservation of Resources theory, we view emotional support as a crucial resource provided by leaders. Data from 275 employees in Serbia's insurance sector were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in SmartPLS 4, with standardized scales measuring leadership behaviors, EI, and job satisfaction. Results revealed that leaders' EI fully mediates the relationship between individualized consideration and job satisfaction, while other transformational leadership traits showed no direct effects. Importantly, EI directly enhances job satisfaction, functioning as both a mediator and an independent contributor. This research advances leadership theory by clarifying how emotional support underpins effective leadership, validating teamwork's role in fostering satisfaction, and offering actionable insights for EI-focused leadership training programs

Keywords: emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, conservation of resources theory, job satisfaction, emotional support

1. INTRODUCTION

Job satisfaction—the extent to which an individual derives a positive affect from their work [1]—is a key determinant of organizational health and a fundamental component of workplace dynamics [2]. As a major contributor to employee well-being, job satisfaction enhances professional fulfillment and serves as a critical mechanism for sustaining productivity [3, 4]. In addition, it is also a widely recognized indicator of reduced absenteeism,

lower turnover rates, and diminished workplace stress [7], underscoring its role as a central issue in human resource management.

For these reasons, the study of job satisfaction holds significant relevance for organizational psychology because it lies at the heart of our understanding of how affective states shape workplace behavior. Its importance as a classic problem in the discipline stems from its instrumental role in explaining employee engagement and performance. As a fundamental property of organizational systems, job

satisfaction has been the subject of many classic studies since the mid-20th century, solidifying its status as a major area of interest for both researchers and practitioners.

However, employee dissatisfaction remains a major problem in the global workplace. Surveys such as the annual Gallup report [8] consistently reveal alarmingly high levels of dissatisfaction. This is compounded by particularly worrying ineffective management, which manifests itself in poor communication, inconsistent support and perceived injustice. Also, one of the biggest challenges is the stark discrepancy between managers' self-assessments of leadership effectiveness and employees' experiences, which highlights systemic shortcomings in current organizational practices. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the problems caused by these managerial shortcomings, as they perpetuate cycles of disengagement and stress. Also, without rethinking leadership strategies, organizations risk exacerbating the critical decline in workplace well-being, which highlights the imperative for evidence-based interventions.

Indeed, leadership is widely recognized as a critical determinant of employee satisfaction, with extensive research confirming its role in mitigating workplace dissatisfaction [9]. However, beyond this direct influence, recent evidence shows that leadership's impact extends through multiple mediating mechanisms. For instance, studies have identified employees' self-efficacy as a key mediator [10], while others highlight psychological empowerment [11] and trust in leadership [12] as pivotal factors. Similarly, investigations into leader-member exchange (LMX) dynamics [13], motivation [14], and organizational identification [15] have revealed additional pathways through which leaders cultivate positive affective and cognitive workplace responses. Collectively, these findings underscore that leadership behaviors do not operate in isolation, but activate a network of psychosocial processes to enhance employee well-being.

Although emotional competencies are widely recognized as essential for effective leadership

[16], and the critical role of leaders in shaping employees' daily emotional experiences is well established [17], the precise way in which a leader's affect—specifically, their ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions—impacts employee outcomes remains less clear. Despite existing evidence linking leaders' EI to employee satisfaction [19, 20], the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship remain poorly understood [18]. Indeed, little is known about the processes through which leaders' emotional awareness translates into tangible workplace well-being, leaving a significant gap in both theory and practice.

For these reasons, this study explored the indirect influence of leaders' EI on employee job satisfaction, addressing a critical gap in leadership research. The central thesis of this paper is that leaders' EI operates through resource dynamics articulated by conservation of resources (COR) theory [24]. In theory, individuals show a tendency to protect valuable resources in order to reduce stress and maintain well-being. In addition, we build on transformational leadership (TL) theory—a framework that explains how leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest and internalize organizational values [21]. Although the effectiveness of TL is well documented [22] and often attributed to leaders' emotional intelligence [23], we explore the psychological mechanisms that link leaders' emotional intelligence to employee satisfaction. Specifically, we propose that emotionally intelligent leaders, by providing emotional support, foster environments in which employees conserve and replenish psychological resources, wherewith increasing job satisfaction.

This study provides new insights into the interplay between TL and job satisfaction by revealing two novel contributions. First, it offers a new perspective on the psychological basis of TL, introducing leaders' EI as a key moderating factor. Specifically, while prior research has predominantly focused on cognitive and motivational mechanisms [34], our findings show that leaders' ability to recognize and regulate emotions—both their own and their

team's—significantly enhances employee satisfaction, thus extending the theoretical boundaries of TL from inspiration to emotion-driven competence. Second, this study fills a gap in the literature by theorizing the mediating psychological processes linking TL to satisfaction. Specifically, it enhances our understanding of how leaders' EI facilitates emotional support practices—such as active listening, empathetic responsiveness, and constructive feedback—that reduce stress and cultivate belonging. Importantly, these practices, which are directly tied to higher job satisfaction [35], reveal a previously under-explored pathway: TL's efficacy hinges not only on vision but also on leaders' capacity to engage in emotion-laden interpersonal interactions.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. COR THEORY, SOCIAL SUPPORT, AND JOB SATISFACTION

According to the COR theory [24], individuals strive to accumulate, protect, and manage resources—defined as anything perceived as useful for achieving goals [36]—to cope with stressful demands. These resources are categorized into personal resources (e.g., self-confidence, optimism) and social resources (e.g., managerial support, peer networks) [30]. While personal resources enable adaptive coping, social resources, such as a supportive environment, bolster psychological resilience (e.g., self-efficacy) and foster trust in organizational networks, especially under stress [24, 31].

As we can see from the categories of resources, when these are depleted or when returns on resource investment fall short, stress arises in two scenarios: (1) perceived/actual resource loss or (2) insufficient returns on resource investment. This imbalance can trigger a loss spiral—a destructive cycle in which dwindling resources weaken our ability to respond and adapt, leading to ever-greater losses. [37]. Similarly, in the organizational context, this dynamic directly intersects with job satisfaction. Employees often experience positive emotional states, higher motivation, and greater

engagement when the resources they receive (e.g., support, recognition, autonomy) outweigh the resources they invest (e.g., time, emotional effort) [38]. Conversely, excessive resource loss correlates with burnout and productivity declines [39]. Notably, under high stress, resource value escalates as their role in sustaining performance becomes critical [40]. For example, leaders' support during peak demands acts as a buffer against depletion, highlighting the interplay between stress and resource prioritization.

Expanding this perspective, social support—particularly from leaders—emerges as a vital organizational resource. It includes not only tangible help (e.g., mentoring) but also the perceived availability of support in future challenges [37]. Leader support operates through dual mechanisms: (1) mitigating immediate stress via practical/emotional help and (2) enhancing resilience by reinforcing employees' confidence in sustained support during adversity [41]. These two mechanisms act to interrupt or mitigate the loss spiral described above by replenishing depleted resources and restoring adaptive capacities. Importantly, studies position leader support as a stronger predictor of satisfaction than peer support, owing to leaders' authority in resource allocation [42]. A critical extension of this concept is perceived social support—employees' belief that leaders value their contributions, care about their well-being, and will act in crises [43]. Unlike sporadic support, this perception fosters lasting security, reduces anticipatory stress, and promotes psychological well-being [44]. Meta-analytic research confirms that perceived leader support has both direct and indirect effects on job satisfaction, with mediating factors such as trust and organizational belongingness [45]. Unlike enacted (actual) support—which employees experience through a leader's concrete actions at a particular moment—perceived support reflects the expectation that help will be available in future challenges, thus creating a lasting sense of security and reducing anticipatory stress.

Drawing on these insights, Bass's transformational leadership theory [21] emphasizes

that leaders enhance employee job satisfaction of two key forms of support: idealized influence and individualized consideration. Idealized influence is based on building trust and moral authority, which encourages employees to adopt shared values and identify with both the leader and the organization. This identification reduces feelings of isolation and increases job satisfaction by fostering a sense of belonging [46]. For instance, when employees believe that leaders genuinely care about their well-being, they feel safer, experience less stress, and develop greater emotional stability [47]. Individualized consideration involves leaders recognizing and adapting to employees' unique needs, goals, and emotional states. It includes: (1) emotional support (e.g., empathy, mentoring), which reduces anxiety and boosts self-worth; (2) instrumental support (e.g., training, resource provision), which facilitates goal achievement and strengthens self-efficacy [43]. Building on the above discussion of idealized influence and individualized consideration, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived leader idealized influence is positively associated with employee job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived leader individualized consideration is positively associated with employee job satisfaction.

2.2. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A LEADER'S PERSONAL RESOURCE

The COR theory posits that stress arises when individuals perceive a threat to, or experience, the actual loss of valued resources. Emotional responses such as tension, anxiety, and frustration represent adaptive reactions to these stressors [48]. Crucially, their intensity is inversely related to the availability of perceived social support [49]. Building on this premise, adequate emotional (social) support—conceptualized as the systematic provision of care, empathy, and trust—functions as a protective factor [50]. As such, it mitigates stress, fosters emotional stability, and strengthens individuals' adaptive capacities despite challenges

[51]. This buffering effect operates through two complementary mechanisms: (1) the generation of positive affective states and (2) the reinforcement of emotional resources through reciprocal interpersonal interaction [52].

Turning to other-oriented positive emotions, including sympathy, compassion, and empathy [53], these play a pivotal role in strengthening social cohesion through their inherently altruistic nature. In particular, these emotions represent adaptive responses to events perceived as detrimental to others' well-being. Compassion, defined as a motivated desire to mitigate suffering [54], is distinguished from empathy, which is conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct: (1) affective sensitivity to others' emotional states, resulting in shared feelings (e.g., sympathy), and (2) cognitive ability to decode and respond appropriately to others' needs [55]. Expanding on this idea, Weine and Auster [56] define compassionate care as sustained emotional engagement that integrates understanding others' emotions and taking proactive beneficial action. The key components are intentional perspective-taking and selfless active listening devoid of judgment or expectation.

Moving on to EI, this concept provides a foundation for understanding individuals' capacity to apply care and empathy in social contexts. According to Mayer and Salovey's influential model [57], EI includes four inter-related competencies: (1) accurately perceiving, appraising, and expressing emotions; (2) using emotions to support cognitive activities; (3) understanding emotional complexity and developmental trajectories; and (4) regulating emotions to foster personal and relational growth. In addition, these competencies enable individuals to engage in affective learning and internalize pro-social behaviors, such as active listening and emotional support, thus directly promoting empathy.

Given EI's central role, empathy—as a core component of emotionally intelligent behavior—extends beyond mere recognition of emotional states. It entails the intentional integration of emotional information into decisions

and behaviors that prioritize others' wellbeing [54]. Therefore, EI functions as a bridge between individual psychological resources and collective social cohesion, linking personal affective abilities with group-level dynamics and performance.

While the COR theory does not explicitly categorize EI as a resource, scholarly work has extended its conceptual framework to incorporate EI—defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate one's own and others' emotions—as a critical personal resource [26–29]. Indeed, this inclusion aligns with COR's characterization of personal resources as stable traits or capacities that enhance stress resilience [24]. Specifically, these include emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, both of which facilitate goal attainment and foster the accumulation of further resources. Supporting this view, empirical studies reinforce this: individuals with higher EI are better equipped to reframe stressors as challenges, regulate their emotions, reduce psychological strain, and cultivate supportive social relationships [55, 56]. Therefore, EI contributes both to stress moderation and the amplification of personal and social resources, consistent with the COR theory's cyclical model of resource conservation and expansion [57].

Shifting focus to leadership, transformational leadership (TL)—characterized by its emotionally engaged and value-driven nature [58]—is intrinsically linked to leaders' emotional intelligence. Although some critical perspectives exist [59], the prevailing consensus, however, identifies EI as a key predictor of TL effectiveness [60, 61], particularly in the dimensions of idealized influence and individualized consideration. Specifically, idealized influence manifests through a leader's emotional self-regulation and authentic behavior, serving as a role model for followers [62]. Emotionally intelligent leaders are more adept at managing their own emotions, thus fostering trust and alignment with organizational values [63].

Likewise, individualized consideration—tailoring communication and support to meet employees' specific needs—is strongly associated

with EI. This is because leaders with higher EI are better at perceiving and interpreting emotional cues, enabling them to provide personalized guidance and motivation [64]. Supporting this point, a meta-analytic review by Harms and Credé [65] underscores this link, concluding that EI not only facilitates emotional bonding but also transforms it into a strategic leadership tool for collective advancement. Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of leaders' idealized influence positively correlate with their level of emotional intelligence.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of leaders' individualized consideration positively correlate with their level of emotional intelligence.

Finally, further empirical evidence highlights the significant positive impact of leader EI on employee job satisfaction [66]. Specifically, emotionally intelligent leaders foster a psychologically safe and emotionally supportive work environment, marked by empathy and genuine concern for employee well-being. A key mechanism is emotional contagion [63], where leaders' authentic expression of positive emotions, such as enthusiasm and optimism, elevates the affective states of their followers.

Echoing the emotion-centered model of leadership [67], EI enables leaders to strategically manage interpersonal interactions to transmit constructive emotional energy. A critical component is deep acting [68], where leaders internalize and sincerely express emotions—rather than resorting to surface-level regulation that lacks authenticity. Synthesizing these insights leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The perceived leader EI is positively associated with employee job satisfaction.

2.3. THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LEADERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Empathy, as a core facet of leaders' EI [69], constitutes a foundational component of TL. Meta-analyses [65] show that empathy not only distinguishes authentic transformational

leaders from those who simulate such behaviors but also enables a personalized approach rooted in attentive listening and understanding employees' specific needs and motivations. This approach, defined as individualized consideration, involves leaders' active engagement in identifying and valuing the unique characteristics of team members, aligning with the paradigm of supportive leadership [70]. In the following, we explore how this personalized support is operationalized through interactive empathy.

The key mechanism here is interactive empathy [71], which entails reciprocal emotional engagement: leaders not only passively recognize employees' emotions but also shape a collective affective climate through dialog and the co-creation of positive experiences. This dynamic contrasts with passive empathy, which is limited to superficial sympathy devoid of operational interventions. Thus, interactive empathy functions as a mediator between leaders' EI and employee job satisfaction, as it translates emotional intelligence into concrete actions—providing care, trust, and support [50]. Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Perceived leader emotional intelligence mediates the positive influence of perceived individualized consideration on employee job satisfaction.

3. METHODS

This study employs a cross-sectional design to investigate leadership dynamics within Serbia's insurance sector, focusing on the two largest companies in this industry. A self-administered online survey, developed using Google Forms, was distributed electronically to employees through their respective life insurance sales directors. This approach was selected to ensure efficient data collection across geographically dispersed teams while maintaining respondent anonymity. Accompanying the survey was a detailed cover letter outlining the research objectives, methods, and assurances of confidentiality, with the directors instructed to emphasize the voluntary nature of participation.

The survey required employees to evaluate their direct managers' leadership style (aligned with transformational leadership theory), EI, and their own job satisfaction. A cross-sectional design was chosen to capture a comprehensive snapshot of workplace attitudes and behaviors at a specific point in time, balancing practicality with the need for timely insights. Using subordinate-reported EI ratings, validated in prior leadership research, enhances validity by reflecting employees' experiences. By integrating these measures, the methods provide a robust framework for analyzing how leaders' emotional competencies mediate workplace satisfaction.

The final sample comprised 275 participants, predominantly female (83%), reflecting the gender distribution prevalent within Serbia's insurance sector. Respondents averaged 43 years of age, and a majority (63.5%) reported a high school diploma as their highest educational attainment. This demographic profile aligns with industry-specific workforce trends in Serbia, where frontline roles in insurance sales are predominantly occupied by mid-career professionals with secondary education. The sample's composition mirrors the sector's reliance on experienced, non-tertiary-educated personnel, consistent with national workforce data characterizing such roles as accessible entry points into the industry.

In order to assess TL, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire 5X (MLQ 5X) [72]—a validated 20-item instrument—was used. This tool operationalizes TL across four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. To measure TL behaviors, employees were asked to rate their managers on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), reflecting the frequency of observed practices.

To evaluate leaders' EI, the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) [73] was administered, capturing four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotions, and regulation

of emotions. Subordinate-reported EI ratings were selected because of their empirical validity in reflecting authentic leadership behaviors [74]. For the measurement of job satisfaction, a 7-item scale adapted from Clark [75] was employed, focusing on satisfaction with advancement opportunities, salary, supervisor relationships, job security, autonomy, task nature, and work hours. All constructs used 5-point Likert scales to standardize the response formats.

To analyze the data, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted in SmartPLS 4.0. PLS-SEM was chosen for its robustness in testing complex mediation models and estimating direct effects [76], particularly suited for smaller sample sizes and exploratory contexts. The process involved two stages: (1) evaluating the measurement model for reliability and validity and (2) assessing the structural model to estimate the path coefficients and mediation effects, ensuring the rigorous testing of the hypothesized relationships.

4. RESULTS

The first set of analyses focused on evaluating the reliability of the indicator variables. Outer loadings ranged from 0.743 to 0.929, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 [77], confirming that each item reliably measured its intended construct. Subsequently, construct validity was assessed using three criteria: (1) Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) to ensure internal consistency, (2) composite

reliability ($CR \geq 0.70$) to verify latent variable stability, and (3) average variance extracted ($AVE \geq 0.50$) to establish discriminant validity. As summarized in Table 1, all constructs met or exceeded these thresholds, demonstrating that they shared more variance with their indicators than with other constructs. These results affirm the measurement model’s reliability and validity, providing a statistically sound foundation for testing structural relationships.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion [77], which requires that the square root of the average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}) for each construct (diagonal values in Table 2) exceeds the bivariate correlations between that construct and all other constructs (off-diagonal values). As shown in Table 2, the \sqrt{AVE} for all constructs (EI = 0.862, II = 0.941, IC = 0.885, IM = 0.889, IS = 0.915, ZP = 0.778) is greater than the highest correlation coefficients between any pair of constructs (e.g., EI-II: 0.859; IC-IM: 0.855). For instance, the \sqrt{AVE} for idealized influence (II) (0.941) surpasses its correlations with other constructs (ranging from 0.684 to 0.929), confirming that II is empirically distinct from related variables. Similarly, employee job satisfaction (JS) demonstrates discriminant validity, as its \sqrt{AVE} (0.778) exceeds its correlations with leadership dimensions ($r = 0.618-0.684$). These results robustly support the discriminant validity of the measurement model, affirming that each construct captures a unique latent trait.

Table 1. Testing Convergent Validity

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Significance	Effect
Individualised consideration (IC)	0.807	0.835	0.783	0.331	79.272
Idealised influence (II)	0.858	0.865	0.799	0.269	81.441
Inspirational motivation (IM)	0.812	0.838	0.791	-0.036	84.233
Intellectual stimulation (IS)	0.835	0.853	0.836	0.130	81.487
Emotional intelligence (EI)	0.873	0.876	0.743	0.268	78.642
Job satisfaction (JS)	0.794	0.815	0.605		

Table 2. Correlations and Discriminant Validity

	EI	II	IC	IM	IS	JS
EI	0.862					
II	0.859	0.941				
IC	0.852	0.929	0.885			
IM	0.818	0.896	0.855	0.889		
IS	0.843	0.894	0.831	0.876	0.915	
JS	0.670	0.684	0.677	0.618	0.666	0.778

In the initial phase of hypothesis testing, we examined the direct effects of TL components on job satisfaction. As shown in Table 3, path coefficients for the relationships between idealized influence and JS ($\beta = 0.192, t = 0.967, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.202, 0.575]$) and individualized consideration and JS ($\beta = 0.252, t = 1.636, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.033, 0.576]$) were statistically non-significant ($p > 0.05$). The confidence intervals for both relationships included zero, further corroborating the absence of direct effects. Thus, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were not supported.

Subsequently, we tested the direct effects of TL components on leaders' EI. Both II and IC exhibited statistically significant positive effects on EI:

II \rightarrow EI: $\beta = 0.288, t = 2.047, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.008, 0.560]$

IC \rightarrow EI: $\beta = 0.296, t = 3.120, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.096, 0.474]$

These results confirm Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4. Finally, EI show a significant direct positive effect on JS ($\beta = 0.268, t = 2.195, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.031, 0.514]$), supporting Hypothesis 5.

Table 3. Direct Effects

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	2.5% CI	97.5% CI
II * ZP	0.192	0.967	-0.202	0.575
IC * ZP	0.252	1.636	-0.033	0.576
EI * ZP	0.268	2.195	0.031	0.514
II * EI	0.288	2.047	0.008	0.560
IC * EI	0.296	3.120	0.096	0.474

To test the significance of the indirect effects of TL on job satisfaction through EI, we applied the bootstrapping method [78] with 5,000 re-samples. The results, presented in Table 4, reveal that the indirect effect of the idealized influence on job satisfaction is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.077, p > .05$), with a 95% confidence interval (CI) spanning

$[-0.004, 0.218]$. In contrast, the indirect effect of individualized consideration is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.079, p < .05$), supported by a 95% CI $[0.005, 0.185]$ that excludes zero. These findings show that EI fully mediates the relationship between individualized consideration and job satisfaction, thus confirming Hypothesis 6.

Table 4. Total Indirect Effects

Path	Original Sample	Mean	2.5%	97.5%
II * ZP	0.077	0.079	-0.004	0.218
IC * ZP	0.079	0.078	0.005	0.185

The nonsignificant mediation for idealized influence suggests that its impact on job satisfaction operates through mechanisms beyond EI. Conversely, the significant mediation for individualized consideration underscores EI's critical role in translating personalized leadership behaviours into enhanced employee satisfaction. These results align with the theoretical frameworks positing EI as a conduit for relational leadership practices [67].

The importance-performance analysis (IPA) presented in Table 1 reveals critical insights into the alignment between employee expectations and organizational delivery. Notably, the individualized consideration dimension (Effect = 79.272) highlights a significant gap between employees' high valuation of personalized leadership and the organization's current performance in meeting these expectations. While employees prioritize tailored support (implied by high importance ratings), the moderate effect score suggests unmet needs, potentially undermining job satisfaction and engagement. Similarly, the idealized influence (Effect = 81.441) and intellectual stimulation (Effect = 81.487) exhibited a stronger alignment although room for improvement remains. The negative coefficient for inspirational motivation (Significance = -0.036) signals a paradoxical relationship, where perceived motivational efforts may inadvertently strain employed well-being, warranting qualitative exploration. Emotional intelligence (Effect = 78.642) and job satisfaction (AVE = 0.605) further underscore the need

for targeted interventions to bridge gaps in leadership practices.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Grounded in the COR theory [24], this study tested a mediation model in which leaders' EI mediates the relationship between TL and employee job satisfaction. Contrary to expectations from prior literature [79, 80], the analysis of Serbian insurance sector data revealed no direct influence of TL on job satisfaction. However, the results confirmed that leader EI acts as a critical mediator in the relationship between individualized consideration and job satisfaction (Hypothesis 6), suggesting that employees perceive satisfaction only when they recognize leaders' authentic care and operationalized support. This aligns with COR mechanisms, where EI functions as a personal resource that fosters the acquisition of other work-related resources (e.g., trust, emotional stability).

A possible explanation for this discrepancy lies in the pronounced emphasis on teamwork within insurance organizations. In such contexts, collective dynamics, such as team autonomy and shared accountability, reduce employees' reliance on immediate supervisory support, as team identification emerges as the primary source of psychological resources [48]. This does not diminish the relevance of leaders' EI; instead, it underscores its contextually contingent influence: leaders with high EI cultivate a positive emotional climate through empathy and support, thus indirectly enhancing psychological capital and collective efficacy [81].

In organizations with pronounced team dynamics, empirical evidence suggests a

strategic imperative to cultivate leaders' EI to foster synergy between team autonomy and sustained emotional support. Practitioners should prioritize team-based interventions, such as peer mentoring programs and collaborative problem-solving frameworks, that strengthen collective psychological resources, rather than relying solely on individualized approaches. These findings contribute to leadership theory by underscoring the moderating role of the organizational context in shaping leader-employee dynamics, while reaffirming the universal significance of EI as a critical mechanism for stress mitigation and resource optimization.

This study is limited by several methodological constraints that warrant a cautious interpretation of the results. First, a key limitation is the cross-sectional design, which prevents causal inferences because of the inability to account for temporal dynamics. A longitudinal approach would be necessary to trace how leaders' EI shapes job satisfaction across time. Second, the reliance solely on employee-reported data introduces potential biases rooted in subjective perceptions. Incorporating multi-source data—such as leader self-assessments or objective performance metrics—could mitigate this issue and enhance validity. Third, the absence of employee EI measures limits insights into the dyadic interplay between leaders and teams. Future research should address this gap by integrating employees' EI as a mediator or moderator. Finally, the generalizability of the findings is constrained by the study's confinement to Serbia's insurance sector. Replicating this work across diverse industries and cultures is essential to validate the external applicability of the results.

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ЕМОЦИОНАЛНА ИНТЕЛИГЕНЦИЈА ЛИДЕРА КАО МЕДИЈАТОР ИЗМЕЂУ ЛИДЕРСТВА И ЗАДОВОЉСТВА ПОСЛОМ: ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ТЕОРИЈЕ ОЧУВАЊА РЕСУРСА

Резиме: Задовољство запослених је суштински фактор успеха сваке организације, а трансформационо лидерство је широко препознато као значајан покретач задовољства. Међутим, у постојећој литератури се ретко истраживало како емоционална интелигенција (ЕИ) лидера може функционисати као посредник у односу између лидерства и задовољства послом, остављајући значајну истраживачку празнину. Ова студија је имала за циљ да испита посредничку улогу перципиране ЕИ лидера у вези између индивидуализованог приступа (кључне димензије трансформационог лидерства) и задовољства запослених послом. Полазећи од Теорије очувања ресурса, емоционална подршка коју пружају лидери се сматра фундаменталним ресурсом. Подаци за анализу прикупљени су од 275 запослених у осигуравајућој индустрији у Србији. Анализа је спроведена методом моделирања структурних једначина (СЕМ) коришћењем софтвера SmartPLS 4, ослањајући се на стандардизоване скале за мерење релевантних конструкта - лидерског понашања, ЕИ и задовољства послом. Добијени резултати су показали да перципирана ЕИ лидера у потпуности посредује у вези између индивидуализованог приступа и задовољства послом, док остале испитиване карактеристике трансформационог лидерства нису показале директне ефекте. Важно је истаћи да је ЕИ лидера такође показала значајан директан ефекат на повећање задовољства послом, делујући тако као медијатор и независни предиктор. Ово истраживање доприноси теорији лидерства пружајући јаснији увид у то како емоционална подршка коју пружају лидери подржава ефикасно вођство. Такође потврђује важност улоге лидера у подстицању задовољства запослених и нуди конкретне смернице за дизајнирање програма обуке за лидерство са акцентом на развој емоционалне интелигенције.

Кључне речи: Емоционална интелигенција, трансформациони лидерство, теорија очувања ресурса, задовољство послом, емоционална подршка