

# **Emotional Intelligence and the Public Administrator**

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## **Abstract:**

This reflection paper explores the critical role of emotional intelligence (EI) in public administration, emphasizing how EI enhances engagement, motivation, and performance among civil servants. Drawing on recent research, it highlights the unique challenges faced by public sector employees and how high-EI individuals are better equipped to navigate complex, multidimensional interactions. It also illustrates how emotional intelligence fosters empathy, collaboration, and resilience in high-stress environments. The paper recommends prioritizing EI as a key trait in recruiting and developing public administrators to improve service delivery and workplace well-being.

While an important consideration of human resource management in the public service sector is to attract and retain “the best and the brightest” employees with a diverse range of talent and experience, it is important to consider soft skills such as emotional intelligence (EI) in those factors. In the article “Engage Them through Emotions,” Levitats, Zehavit, et. al. discuss research on the causal effects between emotional intelligence and aspects of engagement in the public arena. The article acknowledges that high engagement indicators (i.e. vigor, dedication, and absorption) for private-sector jobs may not come from the same motivators as those of public servants (Levitats & Vashdi, 2019). As noted by Holzer and Schwester, utilizing humanistic management approaches and considering workers’ needs, can lead to improvements in employee performance indicators. Understanding the effect EI has on public service workers and nurturing that growth, could impact workplace productivity.

The research shared by Levitats, Zehavit, et. al. recognizes that civil servants have multidimensional interactions in their profession as their roles require that they engage with the social community, their organization, and individuals (Levitats & Vashdi, 2019). Successfully navigating this complexity of dimensions requires a variety of skills by the civil servant and the study explores how emotional intelligence contributes to the success of public sector engagement – the extent by which the civil servant engages themselves (physically, emotionally, and intellectually) as they perform their role. Civil servants are often required to address a multitude of competing priorities from an array of constituents requiring that they meet each need as it arises. High-EI enables the civil servant to navigate this complexity more successfully benefiting the constituent. In addition, the study suggests that public managers with high-EI increase public service engagement by helping fellow public employees navigate the negative effects that come from the demands of their jobs in the public sector. This soft skill not only provides direct benefit

to the public employee but also to the other civil servants around them as well as the general public who rely on public services. The importance of EI in public sector engagement should be considered as a desired trait when striving to attract a diverse and talented workforce in public administration.

Holzer and Schwester's chapter on human resource management also explores the importance that soft skills play in the success of a public administrator. They acknowledge that employee motivation comes from more than just competitive pay and benefits. It also comes by addressing Maslow's hierarchy of human needs which can improve worker performance. Emotional intelligence contributes to self-actualization as individuals with high-EI are more self-aware and understand their needs. Having a high level of self-actualization allows a person to recognize their niche and contributes to their ability to fulfill their own potential.

Having worked in support of a variety of underserved populations, I can relate to the stress and demand put on the public administrator in their daily role. As I have grown professionally and emotionally, I believe my ability to navigate difficult circumstances and manage stress has significantly improved, which has made me a better worker. Assisting student veterans in navigating academic life and their VA benefits can present many obstacles. Using EI has allowed me to be more empathetic in my support for the student veteran, collaborate with other departments and organizations to resolve problems, and care for myself after handling high-stress situations so that I can be more effective in my role. I appreciate Levitats, Zehavit, et. al. attention to the significant role EI plays in public sector engagement and hope that this area continues to get further consideration in the study of human resource management.

References:

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Holzer, M., & Schwester, R. W. (2020). Public Administration An Introduction. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429507878>

Levitats, Zehavit, et al. “Engage Them through Emotions: Exploring the Role of Emotional Intelligence in Public Sector Engagement.” *Public Administration Review*, vol. 79, no. 6, Oct. 2019, pp. 841–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13113>