Political skill as a mediator between trait emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness: A framework for the Nigerian civil service

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Abstract: It is deemed a settled science that leader emotional intelligence is theoretically and empirically relevant to leadership effectiveness. However, how leaders’ emotions affect their functional effectiveness has not been adequately addressed. Drawing on the notion of organisations as political spaces, we posit that leaders’ political skill is an important mechanism that carries the effects of their (individual, hence trait) emotional intelligence onto their effectiveness as leaders. Since all political spaces are inherently local, we therefore build a framework by which the mediating influence of leaders’ political skill in the relationship between their trait emotional intelligence and functional effectiveness can be investigated within the uncertain context of public service reform in Nigeria.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; Political skill; Leadership Effectiveness; Reform; Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) as a philosophy of public sector governance [1] has seen the concurrent proliferation of public sector reform initiatives in diverse countries across the globe [2, 3]. The NPM is characteristically introduced within the context of representative democracy, championing, as it were, participative and open approach to public administration [4]. Nigeria is not an exception, as its Fourth Republic, which debuted in May 1999, has pursued the path of reform as a strategy for re-inventing the Nigerian public sector [5] in line with the twin overarching dicta of the NPM [6]: namely, (i) minimising the role of government vis-à-vis society, and (ii) the improving internal performance of the public sector.

Achieving the dual dicta of NPM-influenced reforms is an emotionally laden exercise [7]. With regards to the Nigerian public sector reform, three sources of emotional challenges stand out as hindrances towards successful realisation of the reform objectives. The first source is the enabling strategies that usually accompany most NPM-induced reform programmes. These strategies include the break-up of large public corporations through commercialisation and privatisation, outsourcing ministerial and institutional administrative functions and public services in the bid to enhance service delivery, strengthening the ethos of merit in human resource management [8, 9], devolving decision-making centres, and “disrupting existing roles and working relationships and leaving some confusion and uncertainty among staff” [10]. The emotional upheaval and exhaustion that seldom fail to accompany such far reaching measures never fail to tax to the extreme the best human relation competences of the most accomplished of higher civil administrators who are expected to midwife the reform dividends.

The second source of emotional challenge is the inherent conflict that exists between the reform targets and the major instrument of reform implementation (i.e., the Nigerian Civil Service). The reform initiative places the Nigerian civil service in the conflicting role of spearheading a reform programme aimed at changing its own
operational processes and culture [11]. To achieve this onerous but doable task, crafters of the reform initiative places the burden of implementation on members of the higher echelon of the service, who are expected to provide the necessary leadership momentum for midwifing the reform deliverables. This means that these administrators are expected to design and implement reform strategies that may likely attenuate their own powers and influence (together with the attendant perks and perquisites), or at best change the existing status quo in ways not entirely in tandem with their individual and collective interests. This is a challenge that transcends matters of technical competence into power dynamics, career survival, and personal relevance in the scheme of things. Matters of career and power and influence seldom fail to elicit powerful emotional and professional pathos from affected parties [12, 13].

The third source of emotional quandary facing higher civil administrators is the challenge of carrying along all the relevant stakeholders. Here, they are expected to somehow strike a fine balance between and among the legions of stakeholders’ interests that characteristically shape public policy [14]. Success largely depends on how well they accommodate the competing and often conflicting (and sometimes mutually exclusive) interests of powerful politicians, influential technocrats, wealthy private sector moguls as well as agitations from influence centres and groups that populate the third economy [15]. Thus, the ability of higher civil administrators to maintain a workable and sustainable balance between and among these interests depends on how well they understood themselves as leaders, how keenly they appreciate others in their variegated characteristics, and how suave the solutions they orchestrate to address the relevant reform issues. In order words, the higher civil administrators need to master two key relational competencies: emotional intelligence and political suavity.

In view of the foregoing, we propose to develop a research framework that explicates the mediating role of political skill in the relationship between trait emotional intelligence of higher civil administrators and their leadership effectiveness within the context of reform politics in Nigeria.

II. RESEARCH GAPS

We identified three gaps in the extant literature on emotional intelligence that form the motive and justification for developing a research framework that could be used in investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and a number of important leadership outcomes.

First, the bulk of research on emotional intelligence about Nigeria is in the field of educational psychology [16], organization studies [17], and law enforcement [18]. Very little is available on the emotional intelligence of higher civil administrators as it relates to their leadership capabilities [19] and the few available studies hardly address leadership issues beyond the institutional level [20]. Thus, emotional intelligence of leaders at the higher echelon of the Nigerian civil service remains unexplored. This indicates the need for fresh studies that contextualise emotional intelligence within the Nigerian higher civil service.

Second, while numerous studies provide empirical evidence that emotional intelligence has positive effect on leadership effectiveness [21] and leadership ideology [22]. Other evidences [23] are antithetical: that emotional intelligence has no significant impact on leadership effectiveness, or at best “somewhat” significant [24]. These
“contradictions and inconsistencies” [25] in the literature indicate a yet un-bridged gap in our understanding of underlying drivers of leadership capability, especially during times of reform uncertainty.

Third, the emotional intelligence construct is insufficiently operationalised, and this underlie some of the contradictions and inconsistencies reported in the literature. Some researchers fail to distinguish between the various conceptualisations of the constructs. There are two basic models of emotional intelligence: ability and trait models [26]. These models are distinct from one another and do not measure the same construct [27]. The ability model is further differentiated from the Big Five personality construct [28]. However, most of the studies on emotional intelligence fail to report the particular model studied [29]. This lacuna provides yet again a rich justification for research efforts in that regard. This paper therefore draws attention on the more behaviourally inclined trait emotional intelligence.

Finally, there is general lack of research reports on political skill as a mediator of the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness. We know of only three of such research reports: Refs. [30], [31] and [32]. The recency of these studies indicates that interest in this research direction is just registering. Decidedly, there is no research work that reports on the mediating influence of political skill on the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness in the context of the Nigerian civil service.

Developing a research framework that help researchers attempting to close the foregoing gaps in the light of leadership dynamics of the Nigerian civil service is the major purpose of this paper.

III. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

As the largest employer of human resource in a country of over 180 million citizens, the Nigerian public service is a veritable leviathan, a highly complex and fiercely contested public space, a forbidden machine, characterised, as it were, by an authoritarian, albeit supposedly democratic governance mechanism built upon the tripod of a spoils system [33], a paternalistic leadership mind-set [34], and a politicised bureaucracy [35]. Higher civil administrators are required by law (through the constitutional provisions called the federal character principle [36]) to accommodate not only the dictates of economics but also most importantly the lore of social cohesion and political expediency when taking any significant decision on issues including but not limited to recruitment, placement, training, promotions [37]. The result of such unorthodox approach to governance [38] is that the Weberian administrative dicta of impersonality, formality, and neutrality [39] are consciously forgotten, while the emotions of the higher administrators, their political superiors, their influential cohorts, as well as other powerful external and internal stakeholders, severally and collectively command the dominant height of decision taking. Thus, Nigerian public sector leaders have come to feel the need to be emotionally adept and politically savvy in order to successfully navigate the emotional rapids that define their operating environment. According to Ref. [40], workers who deal with the public must learn to live a paradox: They need to cultivate the ability to balance the ethical imperatives of trust and integrity with the practical expediency to deceive and lie in order to survive and function.

Politically suave administrators in the Nigerian civil service are seldom forthright, hardly honest, and rarely tell the truth in certain matters [41]; all that matters to them is to persuade and convince you that what they say is indeed true, whether or not it is. The fact that such attitude is geared towards influencing people in ways that enhances
one’s personal objectives with respect to outcomes in subordinates’ behaviours justifies describing it as a manifestation of political skill, albeit of the unsavoury kind [42].

Developing a research framework that contributes towards unravelling the complex nuances in this web of highly emotive relationships form the main purpose of this paper. Particular emphasis is placed on the civil service as an integral component of the Nigerian public sector.

IV. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

A. Trait Emotional intelligence

In general, emotional intelligence refers to “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” [43]. Emotional intelligence has been conceptualised in two ways (trait and ability emotional intelligence), based on “the method of measurement used to operationalize them” [26]. Ability emotional intelligence refers to the aptitude to process complex information about your emotions and the emotions of other people for the purpose of enhancing your reasoning and behavioural competences [44]. Trait emotional intelligence, on the other hand, is concerned with cross-situational consistencies in behaviour (manifest in specific traits or behaviours such as empathy, assertiveness, optimism), and is embedded within the personality framework and is assessed via validated self-report inventories (such as the TEIQue) that measure typical behaviour [29]. For the purpose of this paper, we study emotional intelligence using the trait operationalisation of the construct. Two reasons informed our choice: i) “trait measures of emotional intelligence tended to show higher validities than ability-based measures of emotional intelligence” [45], and ii) as a self-report measure, it is not only straightforward but also “consistent with the subjective nature of emotional experiences” [46].

B. Political Skill

Political skill is a social concept that has been widely defined. The difference in definition begins from the choice of words used to denote the concept. It has been generally called political skill [47], but also political sensitivity [48], and political savvy [49]. In this paper, we chose to use the term political skill in the sense of political suavity because of the characteristic way organisational politics in general play out in the various ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) and extra-ministerial agencies and parastatals that collectively constitute the Nigerian Civil Service: namely, superficiality and lack of sincerity, and the tendency to manipulate [41]. For the purpose of this paper therefore, we adopt the definition given by Ref. [50], which refers to political skill as a leader’s “savvy to know which influence tactics to employ in particular situations, as well as the ability to exhibit a situationally appropriate behavioural style to ensure their influence effectiveness.”

In general, political skill refers to “the capacity to effectively exercise influence over others at work” [51]. It is a leader’s “ability to manipulate his/her inter-personal relationships with employees, colleagues, clients, and supervisors to ensure the ultimate success of the project” [52].
C. Leadership Effectiveness

Two approaches to the construct of “leadership effectiveness” are discernible in the literature [53-55]: task-oriented and person-oriented leadership. Ref. [56] describes the former approach as the getting ahead leader behaviours, and the latter as the getting along behaviours. We limit the scope of this paper to the getting along leadership behaviours as they are person-oriented and presuppose the centrality of human interactions in the leadership equation. This perspective is more in tandem with the notion of human emotions as the nexus of organisational dynamics, of which emotional intelligence and political skill are two key skills required for success in such settings [57]. We therefore use the term leadership effectiveness in the restricted sense of leaders’ ability to influence the behaviour of all stakeholders [58]. For leaders to be effective, they should design to influence all stakeholders because they need the cooperation of all in order to realise their personal and or organisational objectives.

V. Framework and Propositions

From the foregoing discourse, we assert the case that emotionally intelligent leadership is facilitated through the application of political skill by which the myriad of nuances in the leadership arena are mastered and harnessed by leaders to realise both personal, career and organisational ends in an environment marked by complexity and continual change. Thus, political skill is a veritable emotional intelligence-enhancing skill to becoming a truly effective leader. Accordingly, Fig. 1 was developed as a general research framework for investigating the mediating impact of political skill on the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness, bearing in mind that the direct influence of emotional intelligence on leadership effectiveness is equally present.

![Figure 1. Research Framework](image)

A. Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Effectiveness

Several studies have found positive effects of emotional intelligence on leadership effectiveness [59]. Ref. [60] suggests that since emotions are response tendencies; they may be recognised, regulated, and managed as aspects of effective leadership. Several other studies also support the notion that leaders with high emotional intelligence are
associated with transformational leadership [61]. With regards to public sector leaders, it was reported that leaders who score higher on the emotional intelligence subscales of self-actualisation, empathy, social responsibility, stress tolerance, problem-solving, and optimism are significantly more effective than those with low scores [62]. In a slightly different but complementary perspective, Ref. [63] reports that leaders need to be emotionally intelligent in order to generate and activate what he called executive presence, which he defines as a demonstration of “… judgement and character to do the right thing – to be the leader who will get the job done with integrity and inspire others to fully commit to the task, mission and vision” [63]. In fact, Ref. [64] shows the intimate connexion of leaders’ personality and leadership effectiveness, suggesting that there are other social competences such as political suavity that enhances leaders’ effectiveness.

To contextualise the foregoing discourse, we refer to the on-going public sector reforms initiative and the leadership challenges Nigeria’s higher civil administrators face in producing the reform deliverables. As is true in other climes [65], the challenges transcend those of technical administrative competences into personality, emotional and relational ones. These challenges are likely to be more acutely experienced at the higher levels of the service; because, it is the higher civil administrators that are expected to provide the necessary leadership momentum for the reform initiative. One quality required of the higher civil administrators to be able to midwife the reform outcomes, therefore, is a “soft” peoples-skill, a skill which will enable them maintain a workable and sustainable balance between and among the disparate, competing and often conflicting stakeholders’ interests. One such necessary “soft” skill is emotional intelligence. Thus, leadership effectiveness at the higher echelon of the civil service with regards to reform implementation is a function of the higher administrators’ emotional intelligence endowments. Accordingly, we propose as follows:

Proposition 1: The emotional intelligence endowments of higher civil administrators impacts directly on their leadership effectiveness.

B. Emotional Intelligence and Political Skill

Ref. [66] argues that “leader political skill is one of those key skills … critical to leadership effectiveness” which leaders require in dealing with all types of stakeholders, and Ref. [67] considers political skill as one of four crucial leadership roles. In a study of 151 and 120 leaders and their subordinates respectively, Ref. [68] reports that political skill is a necessary requirement for leaders to carry along their subordinates. This require remains cogent even in informal leadership roles [69], within formal organisations [70], or in statesmanship [71]. In view of these empirical evidences, we posit that effective leaders will build and use their political skill to tap into the resources, knowledge, and skills of others in order to handle complex organisational or national challenges.

In the complex and highly contested environment of the Nigerian public service reform politics, it is decidedly not enough for a higher civil administrator to simply understand her or his own emotions as well as the emotions of people she or he relates with in the course of discharging he or his official duties, she or he should also be acutely alive to the relational nuances within the context in which the interaction takes place. Thus, in addition to possessing the fundamental relational skill of emotional intelligence, an administrator must possess the contextual political awareness that facilitate fruitful usage of her or his emotional endowments [27]. An emotionally astute administrator may flounder if she or he fails to take cognizance of the social undercurrents in the workplace. In other words, an
emotionally intelligent administrator who lacks the interpersonal savvy or the networking ability or the apparent sincerity to leverage his or her emotional endowments may fail to achieve success as leader. We therefore advance the following proposition:

Proposition 2: There is a direct relationship between the emotional endowments of higher civil administrators and their political skill.

C. Emotional Intelligence, Political Skill and Leadership Effectiveness

Refs. [72], [73] and [74] report that leader political skill yields several beneficial outcomes (e.g., ethical employee behaviours, relationship quality, leader and follower effectiveness relationships), but might also help leaders disguise deviant intentions. Also, by adding political skill to the model associating emotional intelligence and leadership, Refs. [17] and [31] in separate civil engineering cases, as well as Refs. [30] and [32], show how leaders’ emotional intelligence is manifested in the form of effective influence efforts through the application of political skill, and how leaders’ political skill in turn allows them to become effective. Indeed, higher civil administrators work in an inherently political environment, peopled by their political overloads, contractors, civil society organisations, lobbyists, legislations of other government agencies both ministerial and extra-ministerial, pressures groups (e.g. unions and women activists: see Refs. [75] and [76]), etc. The increasing role of external stakeholders in influencing policy and delivering or co-producing services—and the requirement for administrators to interact with such bodies—is a big factor in the need for emotional and political competences [77] to become an especial priority for higher civil administrators.

In consonance with the above disquisition, we situate the nexus of emotions, politics, and leadership in the Nigerian civil service. The Nigerian civil service is now “highly politicized with all service decisions based solely on political considerations” [78] rather than the espoused meritocratic considerations. Higher civil administrators who presume to act according to the guiding principles, norms and standards of professionalism, neutrality and within constitutional boundaries are more likely to be marginalized in the scheme of things by their politically savvy counterparts and political superiors. For this reason, higher civil administrators have come to appreciate the necessity of political dexterity not only in doing their official assignments but also to survive and prosper. Thus, in order to safeguard their individual careers, the higher civil administrators are wont to behave in a politically correct manner by constantly being attuned to the behavioral propensities of their political superiors and political protégés. One overarching social skill that captures such prototypically and contextual intelligence is political skill. Thus, in addition to emotional intelligence, higher civil administrators need to possess basic mastery of political skill in order to successfully navigate and survive in the uncertain and seldom charted waters of civil service politics, and ultimately deliver on the mandates of their respective offices. Hence, we make the following proposition:

Proposition 3: The political skill of higher civil administrators mediates the relationship between their emotional intelligence endowments and their leadership effectiveness.
VI. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The cross-sectional survey method is recommended. Of the four types of survey designs (cross-sectional, longitudinal, quasi-longitudinal, and authentic-longitudinal), we suggest the use of cross-longitudinal design. Although cross-sectional surveys, by collecting data on the relevant variables at a single point in time, have been criticised for being inappropriate in collecting data for testing causality [79], Ref. [80] shows that cross-sectional studies using pooled data can yield valid results in causal studies.

A. Instruments for Data Collection

We suggest the following three instruments (or their adaptations as the case may warrant) to be used in data collection: namely, the short form of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire [TEIQue-SF] (to measure respondents’ trait emotional intelligence); the Political Skill Inventory [PSI] (to measure their political skill); and the Circumplex Leadership Scan [CLS] (to capture respondents’ level of person-oriented leadership effectiveness).

Originally developed in England [81], the TEIQue is a self-report questionnaire with four dimensions: namely, emotionality, self-control, sociability, and well-being. “The TEIQue is the only instrument that is explicitly based on trait EI theory and that covers the sampling domain of the construct comprehensively” [26]. Currently, there are two basic versions of the TEIQue: the long form (TEIQue-LF) and the short form (TEIQue-SF). The TEIQue-LF is a 153-items instrument, while the TEIQue-SF consists of 30 items, with an average completion time of 25 and 7 minutes respectively [46]. We suggest the adoption or adaption of the TEIQue-SF because time constraints can preclude the use of the TEIQue-LF, better response rate can be achieved using the TEIQue-SF rather than TEIQue-LF, and the TEIQue-SF is a valid and viable alternative to the TEIQue-SF [82].

To measure administrator’s political skill, we suggest the PSI developed by Ref. [83]. The PSI is an 18-item questionnaire with four dimensions: namely, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. The items making up the inventory were responded on a seven-point Likert-type agreement scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. The PSI has demonstrated excellent construct and criterion validity properties and other psychometrics [84]. Ref. [85] reports 0.91 and 0.90 Cronbach’s alphas for the PSI.

To measure leadership effectiveness, the Circumplex Leadership Scan (CLS) is suggested. This instrument is suggested because it has the potential to capture and measure all the variegated styles of leadership behaviours that play out in the civil service arena. The CLS is an evidence-based interpersonal circumplex leadership tool that measures the full range of interpersonal leadership behaviours, providing insight into a leader’s unique ability to influence others. Developed and validated by Ref. [86], the CLS contains a two-dimensional structure (the result-oriented or agentic dimension and the people-oriented or communal dimension) that sufficiently describes leadership behaviours. It contains 116 leadership descriptive items, measuring eight leadership styles (coaching, inspirational, directive, authoritarian, distrustful, withdrawn, yielding, and participative). The CLS seeks to integrate eight leadership types extant in the literature and practiced in the world of work. It is a psychometrically sound instrument, and is freely open to use for research purposes.
B. Tools of Data Analysis

[62] and [32], we recommend multiple regression analysis in testing the relationships indicated in the general research framework (Fig. 1) above. Though [31] used structural equation modelling (SEM) in his tests, it was observed that the SEM is not the right technique to use as “it is limited in its power to examine mediating relationships, especially with so many variables (both observed and latent) in the model” [32]. Multiple regression is suitable as it is generally used in analyzing the relationship between more two variables [87].

VII. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we present a research framework that could be used to investigate the mediating role of political skill in the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness. This framework is presented as a tool to be used in bridging the inadequate explanation that exists in the extant literature on the link between leaders’ emotional intelligence and their functional effectiveness, using political skill as the explanatory mechanism. Notwithstanding the presentation of the framework in the context of the Nigerian civil service, we believe that it is sufficiently general to be used in investigating same phenomena happening within other contexts.

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