The American Journal of Management and Economics Innovations
ISSN 2693-0811 | Open Access

TYPE Original Research
PAGE NO. 126-134
DOI 10.37547/tajmei/Volume07Issue07-15

Theoretical foundations of emotional intelligence in executive coaching

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OPEN ACCESS
SUBMITTED 13 June 2025
ACCEPTED 24 June 2025
PUBLISHED 29 July 2025
VOLUME Vol.07 Issue 07 2025

CITATION

Devika Das. (2025). Theoretical foundations of emotional intelligence in executive coaching. The American Journal of Management and Economics Innovations, 7(07), 126–134. https://doi.org/10.37547/tajmei/Volume07Issue07-15

Abstract: The article examines the theoretical basis for the role of emotional intelligence in executive coaching practice. In a dynamic VUCA environment complicated by digital transformation and technological stress, the relevance of this research is determined by the need to enhance leaders' adaptability through the development of emotional competencies. The work aimed to conduct a systematic analysis of classical and contemporary models of emotional intelligence (ability approach, mixed model, and trait approach), to assess their diagnostic instruments, and to substantiate the mechanisms for integrating EI into the executive coaching cycle. The novelty of the study lies in its multidisciplinary synthesis of data, encompassing the psychometric properties of the MSCEIT, EQ-i, and ESCI, as well as neuro-visualization experiments (fMRI) and HRV biofeedback, alongside consideration of coaching industry trends. For the first time, meta-analytic results on the effectiveness of individual and group coaching interventions have been combined with real-world cases of job crafting and mindfulness training, enabling the construction of a comprehensive methodology for diagnosis, the formulation of emotionally concrete objectives, and practical micro-practices. The main findings demonstrate that developing EI through the structured coach-cycle diagnosis → goals → interventions → verification yields a statistically significant improvement in management outcomes, a reduction of subordinates' techno-stress, and an enhancement of authentic leadership. Neurophysiological data confirm the effectiveness of PEA sessions for activating self-awareness and ensuring durable transfer of changes into behavior. At the same time, HRV biofeedback and the CSMC model demonstrate measurable business dividends in terms of

reduced burnout and turnover. This article will be particularly useful to consultants and practitioners in executive coaching, HR directors, and researchers in organizational psychology.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, executive coaching, ability approach, mixed model, trait approach, psychometric diagnostics, neurovisualization, HRV biofeedback, meta-analysis.

Introduction

In a rapidly changing VUCA environment, leaders confront the scale of digital transformation, employees' technological stress, and managing a multinational, distributed team daily. Research shows that it is precisely the capacity to recognize and regulate emotions that helps a leader reduce subordinates' techno-stress and maintain team resilience in periods of uncertainty. In contrast, purely cognitive skills are no longer sufficient (Ertiö et al., 2024). Empirical evidence confirms the practical value of emotional intelligence. At the level of leadership styles, the association is even stronger: aggregated data show a correlation of ρ ≈ 0,49 between EI and authentic leadership, which in turn mediates personnel trust and engagement (Miao et al., 2018). Thus, emotional intelligence serves as a predictor both of what a leader does and how they do it.

Executive coaching has become the primary organizational mechanism for developing these competencies. The most recent meta-analysis, encompassing 11 high-quality studies, indicated that individual coaching support yields a moderate aggregate effect (Hedges g ≈ 0.45), reaching a value of 0.48 in in-person formats; virtual sessions are only slightly less effective, retaining a statistically significant positive influence (Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023). Demand for such interventions is growing at an accelerating rate. According to the International Coaching Federation, the number of practicing coaches worldwide increased by 54% from 2019 to 2022, exceeding 109,000 for the first time, and the market's total annual revenue reached USD 4.564 billion (ICF, 2023). These figures reflect companies' strategic decision to invest in leaders' emotional intelligence development as the most cost-effective means of boosting adaptability and long-term business performance.

Materials and Methodology

The investigation of emotional-intelligence theoretical foundations in executive coaching is based on an analysis of 19 key sources, including classical conceptual works, empirical studies, meta-analyses, psychophysiological and neurovisualization experiments, as well as industry reports. The theoretical framework considered the original definitions of emotional intelligence by Salovey and Mayer (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and Goleman's popularization model (Goleman, 1995), alongside three principal approaches: the ability approach, articulated in the four-branch model and the MSCEIT test (Brackett et al., 2025; Odukoya, 2020); Goleman–Boyatzis's mixed-competency model (Livesey, 2017); and Bar-On's trait-disposition model (Bar-On, 2006). Empirical data included studies on EI's role in reducing leaders' techno-stress (Ertiö et al., 2024), the correlation between emotional intelligence and authentic leadership (Miao et al., 2018), as well as outcomes of major meta-analyses on coaching effectiveness: individual interventions (Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023) and structured emotional-competency trainings (Mehler et al., 2024). Market trends and the scope of executive coaching were illustrated with data from the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2023). Additional sources comprised the Intentional Change Theory neurovisualization study (Jack et al., 2023), pilot randomized trials of mindfulness practices (Santos et al., 2024), the Crafting for Stress Management Coaching program (Kovács et al., 2025), and the mobile HRV biofeedback protocol (Vagedes et al., 2024).

Methodologically, the study employed several techniques for a comprehensive data synthesis. First, a comparative analysis of diagnostic instruments was performed: the performance-based MSCEIT (Brackett et al., 2025; Odukoya, 2020) versus the self-report EQ-i (Bar-On, 2006) and 360° ESCI survey (Hay Group, 2011), assessing their reliability, validity, and applicability in coaching. Second, a systematic review and meta-analytic synthesis of results from five large meta-analyses were conducted, including effects of individual coaching (Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023), corporate EI-development programs (Mehler et al., 2024), and correlations of EI with work attitudes (Miao et al., 2016, 2018). Third, a content analysis of protocols and outcomes from randomized controlled trials of EI-development techniques was carried out: a crossover test of mindfulness training (Santos et al., 2024), the CSMC stress-management model (Kovács et al., 2025), and HRV biofeedback (Vagedes et al., 2024). The fourth methodological component involved

analyzing fMRI neurovisualization data to evaluate the activation of imagination and self-awareness networks (Jack et al., 2023). Finally, the synthesis of market and industry reports (ICF, 2023) enabled the evaluation of strategic priorities and the economic rationale for investing in leaders' emotional intelligence development.

A systematic literature search was conducted in Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar (January 1990–December 2024) using the keywords “emotional intelligence” and “executive coaching.” Of 121 records identified, 19 studies met inclusion criteria (randomized or quasi-experimental designs, meta-analyses, adult manager samples) after duplicate removal and title/abstract screening.

Results and Discussion

The concept of emotional intelligence has evolved gradually over time. Early articles on social intelligence appeared as far back as the 1920s, yet P. Salovey and J. Mayer proposed the modern definition in 1990, when they described emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide thinking and behavior. The construct gained enormous public recognition after the publication of D. Goleman’s book Emotional Intelligence in 1995, which triggered an avalanche of research and practical programs.

The first and most narrow conceptualization corresponds to the ability approach. In Salovey and Mayer’s four-branch model, emotional intelligence is construed as a cognitive ability comprising the perception of emotions, their use to facilitate thought processes, understanding the causal relationships of emotions, and managing them; it is primarily validated via the MSCEIT test, in which respondents solve standardized emotional tasks (Brackett et al., 2025). This approach brings EI closer to classical notions of mental ability, allowing it to be empirically distinguished from personality traits.

The second tradition, proposed by D. Goleman and elaborated by R. Boyatzis, describes EI as a set of observable competencies grouped into four clusters: self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management. Here, the behavioral 360° assessment plays a key role: competencies are recorded based on feedback from colleagues, subordinates, and the leader themself, making the model particularly applicable to leadership development; empirical studies show that up to 95% of managerial problems in large projects are related to these competencies (Livesey, 2017).

The third trait approach, developed by R. Bar-On, considers emotional intelligence as a relatively stable configuration of emotional and social dispositions, encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and adaptive aspects. It is measured by the self-report EQ-i questionnaire, published in 1997 and translated into more than thirty languages; the instrument assesses fifteen scales grouped into five meta-factors and has demonstrated acceptable reliability and cross-cultural validity (Bar-On, 2006).

Despite differing initial assumptions, all three models converge on the idea that the key processes are the recognition, understanding, and regulation of affective states. The ability approach emphasizes the cognitive nature of these processes and requires objective testing. The mixed model extends the framework to encompass leadership competencies and social behavior. The trait model describes a stable profile of emotional dispositions. These differences are also reflected in diagnostic methods: from accuracy-based tasks to multi-source feedback and self-reports. In executive coaching, they complement one another: ability tests establish a cognitive baseline, competency profiles translate results into the language of managerial skills, and trait measurements help track long-term dynamics, providing a holistic view of the leader’s emotional architecture.

Executive coaching, as discussed above in relation to emotional intelligence, aims to enhance organizational adaptability by providing individualized support to leaders. In corporate practice, executive coaching denotes a structured series of confidential conversations during which the leader formulates and achieves goals for improving effectiveness, strengthens leadership competencies, and receives support in managing change. On the evidence base level, this development is already comparable in effect size to traditional training programs: a meta-analysis of 37 randomized controlled trials yielded an average effect size of Hedges’ $g = 0.59$, corresponding to a moderate impact on a range of behavioral, cognitive, and affective outcomes (Haan & Nilsson, 2023), while another sample produced similar estimates across different approaches—$g \approx 0.45$ for process-oriented and 0.39 for outcome-oriented interventions (Cannon-Bowers et al.,

2023), as shown in Figure 1.

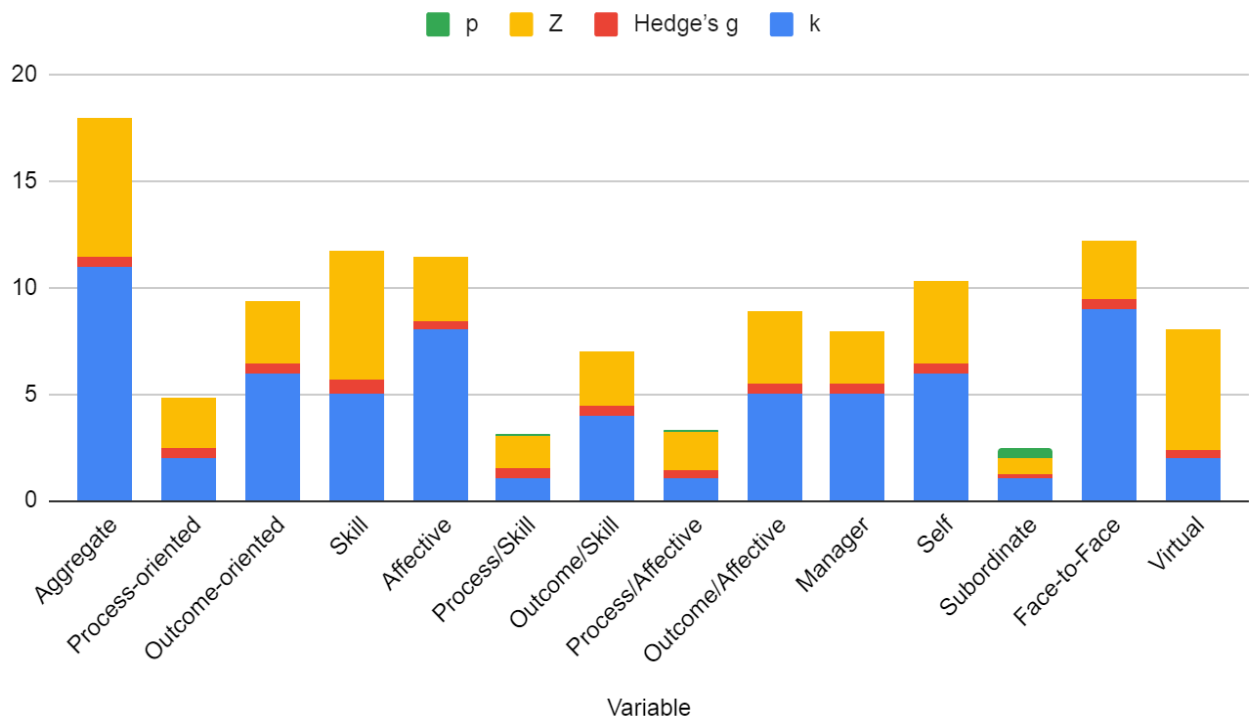

Fig. 1. Results of the meta-analyses concerning aggregated effect sizes and the moderator factors (Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023)

The standard coaching-support cycle logically continues the processes of emotional-intelligence assessment and development. Work begins with diagnosis: 360° feedback data, psychometric results, and business metrics are collected to establish the baseline. Next, the coach and client agree on specific, measurable goals to link emotional insights to performance indicators. The third step comprises the interventions themselves—regular sessions, practical on-the-job assignments, and, where necessary, the involvement of external stakeholders. The final phase is evaluation and consolidation, which includes repeating feedback, analyzing KPI dynamics, and planning self-sustaining actions. The straightforward logic of diagnosis → goals → actions → verification embeds emotional intelligence within a measurable managerial practice.

Thus, executive coaching serves as an operational framework through which identified emotional intelligence deficits are translated into concrete developmental steps. Its proven effectiveness, market scale, and formalized process make coaching a key instrument, without which the integration of emotional intelligence into everyday leadership remains a declaration rather than a strategic investment.

The initial steps of the coaching cycle—diagnosis and goal setting—acquire meaning only when the coach and leader can differentiate their emotional patterns. A neuro-visualization study within the framework of Intentional Change Theory showed that activation of the default-mode imagination network increases sharply when the client first reflects on their ideal self, rather than immediately attempting to fix current behavior; this sequence reinforces reflexive self-awareness and predicts greater transfer of insights into action (Jack et al., 2023). For the coach, this implies that a high-quality entry into the process begins not with KPIs, but with normalizing the client's internal dialogue and an honest appraisal of their triggers.

Once self-awareness is drawn out of automaticity, the dyad activates the second layer of emotional intelligence—empathy. Developing empathy in the leader sequentially increases employee trust and retention; it is through empathic communication that the coach creates a psychologically safe space for experimenting with new behavioral models. In practice, this appears as clarifying questions, reflection of the client's feelings, and regular checks of consent for the proposed direction.

The third component—the capacity to manage affect under pressure—is critical during the active intervention

phase. A meta-analysis of 40 emotional-competency development programs, published in BMC Psychology, demonstrates a mean standardized mean difference (SMD ≈ 0.46) that remains stable three months after training, with equally significant effects for EI, empathy, and emotion-regulation training (Mehler et al., 2024). Specifically for managers, a five-session Crafting for Stress Management Coaching model was adapted, in which the coach trains the client in proactive job crafting as a means of reducing distress and enhancing eustress; a pilot with 56 top executives yielded a clinically significant reduction in PSS-10 stress-tension scores after six weeks (Kovács et al., 2025). These data confirm that emotional regulation is not a by-product of coaching but an independent objective with measurable business dividends (lower burnout, reduced turnover).

Figure 2 presents a visualization spanning two weeks, including the Christmas and New Year holidays. The red line represents perceived demands, the blue dashed line denotes resource availability, the brown dash-dot line indicates levels of distress, and the green dot-dash line reflects levels of eustress. Before the holiday, demands remained high (4–5 points), which was accompanied by increasing distress against relatively stable resources (≈4 points). During the holiday, demands fell sharply to ≈3 points and distress nearly vanished; however, eustress dropped below its baseline level (≈1.5–2 points), while resources stayed constant, suggesting insufficient stimulation during rest and the need for more deliberate use of available resources for recovery.

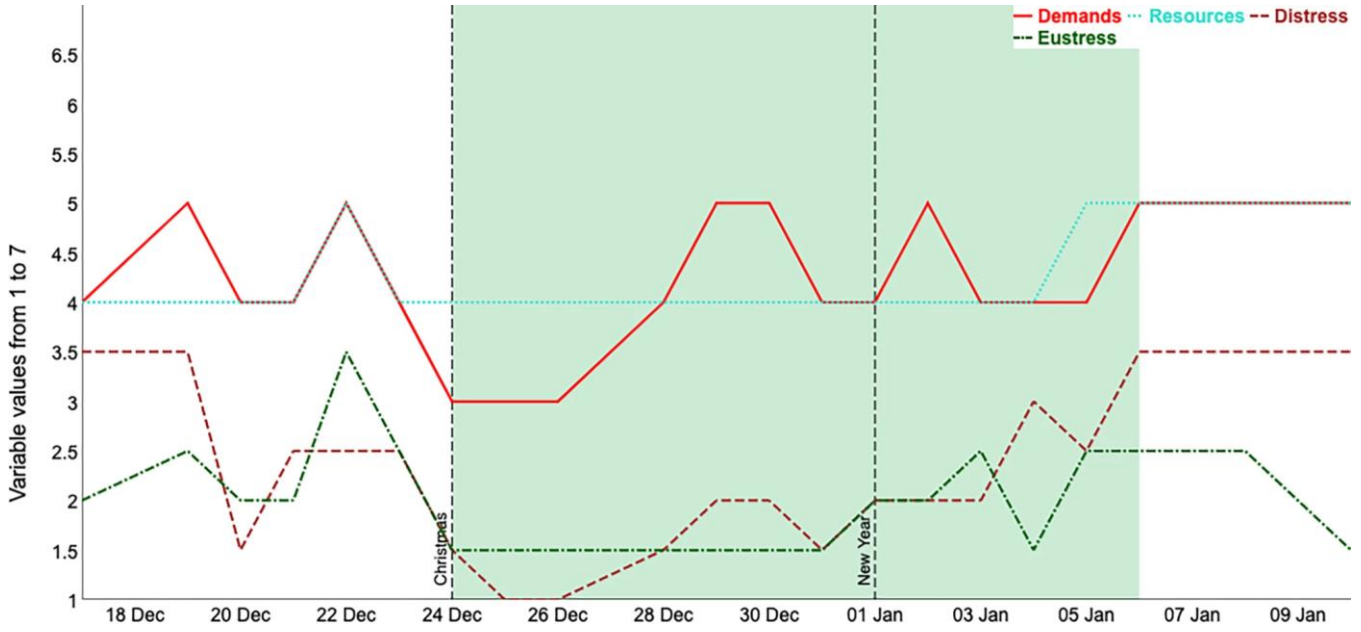

Fig. 2. Exemplary visualization of the 14-day questionnaire's data (Kovács et al., 2025)

Upon returning to work, demands rose again and soon reached their previous peak levels, followed by an increase in distress. In contrast, resources did not increase until several days later, creating a delay in the mobilization of support and skills. Eustress after vacation fluctuated at a lower level without a clear trend toward restoring a healthy challenge. These observations underscore the importance of advanced planning and proactive resource allocation during periods of high workload, as well as during leave, to incorporate light yet stimulating activities that maintain a sense of eustress and facilitate a smoother transition back to work.

Finally, sustaining change requires an internal energetic resource. Studies of the positive emotional attractor (PEA) show that simply focusing a coaching session on an image of the desired future increases the intensity of positive affects and broadens cognitive flexibility; experimental work by Boyatzis et al. found that a single PEA-mode session nearly doubled action readiness on 360° feedback compared to discussing areas for improvement (Howard, 2015). It is this positive charge that transforms new emotional skills into enduring motivation, closing the loop of diagnosis → goals → actions → verification and ensuring the long-term effect of the coaching contract.

The reliable integration of emotional intelligence into executive coaching begins with an accurate diagnosis. In practice, three complementary families of instruments are used. The ability approach relies on the MSCEIT, with internal consistency for the overall index ranging from α = 0.91 to 0.93, and for the ability branches, ranging from

0.78 to 0.90, allowing for a clear separation of EI's cognitive components from personality traits (Odukoya, 2020). The mixed model is implemented in the 360° ESCI survey, which comprises a normative database of over 4,000 participants and 42,000 respondents. Longitudinal samples confirm the predictive link between most competencies and leadership-effectiveness ratings, with moderate coefficients ($r \approx 0.30–0.45$) (Hay Group, 2011). The combination of an ability-based test, self-assessment, and multi-source feedback provides a holistic emotional cross-section of the leader, minimizing the distortions inherent to any single method.

After diagnosis, the coach and client formulate goals by translating test data into behavioral terms. Specifying tasks through emotional markers (to recognize colleagues' fatigue before a meeting instead of the abstract to improve communication) nearly doubles the likelihood of achieving the planned outcome, because it activates the positive emotional attractor and amplifies motivation for action. Thus, emotionally concrete goals bridge the cognitive and affective sides of development and render subsequent interventions tangible.

The substantive part of the work is built on three groups of micro-practices. First, maintaining an emotions journal. Regular written reflection by leaders correlates with higher-quality managerial decisions and promotes growth in self-awareness on EI self-report scales within just a few weeks. Second, mindfulness pauses: a randomized crossover trial involving nurse leaders demonstrated increases in both MSCEIT scores and resilience after an eight-week training, confirming that brief attention practices enhance both capacity and experienced competence in EI (Santos et al., 2024). Third, role-play exercises and other forms of experiential learning: a recent meta-analysis of 50 corporate emotional-competency development programs reports a combined SMD = 0.61, and the authors emphasize that modules featuring live difficult conversation scenarios contribute the most (Mehler et al., 2024). Additionally, in the upper segment of the market, there is a growing use of HRV biofeedback. A four-week mobile HRV-training protocol reduced burnout indicators and increased managers' heart-rate variability (SDNN), demonstrating an objective metric of emotional self-regulation (Vagedes et al., 2024).

Progress evaluation concludes with repeat combined testing and behavioral indicators. A six-month re-administration of the ESCI shows increased competency scores that statistically coincide with a positive shift in subordinates' trust ratings. At the same time, parallel HRV monitoring records a sustained reduction in physiological reactivity to stress. Such multi-channel measurement—psychometrics, 360° feedback, and physiology—verifies that changes have moved from the insight zone into enduring behavior, minimizing social-desirability bias. As a result, the integration instruments transform emotional intelligence from an abstract concept into a manageable set of goals, practices, and verifiable outcomes, fully embedded in the executive-coaching cycle.

Emotional intelligence thus becomes an intelligible conduit between the purely psychological mechanisms described above and what managers typically refer to as business results. Once the coach translates work with emotions from abstraction into measurable habits, the organization obtains tangible returns, above all in team climate, decision quality, and innovative drive.

At the team-climate level, a meta-analysis of 119 studies found that self-reported EI is negatively associated with turnover intention ($\rho = -0.33$) and accounts for an additional 60.9% of explained variance beyond personality traits and cognitive abilities; the same sample yielded a correlation of 0.43 with organizational commitment, indicating that employees become emotionally attached to the workplace (Miao et al., 2016). A more recent two-factor model of culture has shown that EI-supportive HR practices alone explain nearly a quarter of the variance in turnover (22.7%), underscoring the systemic—not solely individual—nature of the effect, as displayed in Table 1 (Levitats et al., 2022).

Table 1. Regression analysis for the relationship between EI-supportive HRM practices, low regard for emotional values, and the outcome variables (Levitats et al., 2022)

	Positive outcomes						Negative outcomes					
	Organizational commitment			Engagement			Turnover intentions			Burnout		
	β	95% CI		β	95% CI		β	95% CI		β	95% CI	
		Low	Up		Low	Up		Low	Up		Low	Up
EI-Supportive HRM practices	0.68***	0.47	0.55	0.36***	0.25	0.35	−0.19***	−0.23	−0.12	−0.20***	−0.26	−0.13
Low regard for emotions Values	−0.33***	−0.32	−0.23	0.02	−0.04	0.08	0.54***	0.49	0.61	0.41***	0.38	0.52
	$R^2 = 0.349$***			$R^2 = 0.140$***			$R^2 = 0.227$***			$R^2 = 0.127$***		
	$F(2,1024) = 274.72$***			$F(2,1024) = 82.93$***			$F(2,1024) = 150.76$***			$F(2,1024) = 74.27$***		

***$p < 0.001$.

Next, the influence on the speed and quality of managerial decisions becomes apparent. In a sample of 213 top executives from UAE banks, emotional intelligence demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with the quality of strategic decisions, and a structural model confirmed the mediating role of open innovation in information systems (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021). Practically, this means fewer pro- and re-transmissions in decision-making cycles and more substantiated decisions under uncertainty, which is critical in the transformational initiatives described in the previous section.

The increase in employee engagement amplifies the effect. In other words, emotionally intelligent leadership not only retains staff but also raises the likelihood that ideas will advance to the stage of actionable projects.

Taken together, these data establish a clear economic rationale for integrating an EI approach into executive coaching: reduced recruitment and onboarding costs through lower turnover, shortened decision-making and approval cycles, increased productivity through engagement, and an expanded innovation portfolio. The coach's task is simply to link each of these metrics to the tools already discussed (emotional KPIs, 360° feedback, emotion journals), thereby turning soft skills into distinct financial indicators.

Conclusion

Emotional intelligence not only contributes to effective management of techno-stress and adaptation to rapid change but also underpins the formation of authentic leadership, which in turn strengthens employee trust and engagement. This is supported by both empirical data and meta-analyses, which demonstrate the importance of emotional competencies in enhancing management effectiveness and team resilience.

The evolution of the emotional-intelligence concept—from early work on social intelligence to contemporary models such as the ability approach, mixed model, and trait approach—attests to the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. All three approaches agree on the importance of recognizing, understanding, and regulating emotions, though each focuses on different aspects of the process. Combining these models in executive coaching enables a more comprehensive approach to developing leaders' emotional intelligence, providing a fuller and more nuanced understanding of their emotional competencies.

The proven effectiveness of executive coaching, reinforced by numerous studies, confirms its significance in boosting adaptability and leadership qualities, as well as improving concrete business outcomes. The coaching process—comprising diagnosis, goal setting, interventions, and progress evaluation—facilitates deep integration of emotional intelligence into everyday leadership practice. Such an approach not only enhances individual effectiveness but also has a direct impact on team climate, decision quality, and the organization's innovative capacity.

The most critical components of coaching are the development of self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to manage emotions under pressure, as evidenced by both research findings and practical programs. These skills markedly reduce employee stress, increase engagement, and improve performance metrics. In turn, supporting leaders in formulating and achieving emotionally concrete goals through structured coaching sessions strengthens motivation and fosters sustainable, positive behavioral change.

Integrating emotional intelligence into executive coaching becomes a strategically important tool for organizations seeking to increase their effectiveness amid constant change. Emotionally literate leadership enhances team climate, reduces turnover, and accelerates decision-making, ultimately driving innovation and overall productivity. Thus, investing in the development of emotional intelligence through coaching is a profitable and long-term solution for organizations seeking sustainable success in uncertain conditions.

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