

# Human capital sustainability leadership in workers: From personality traits to emotional intelligence

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## Abstract

This study examined the relationships between Trait Emotional Intelligence and Human Capital Sustainability Leadership, controlling for the effect of personality traits. Two hundred and fifty-nine Italian workers were administered the *Big Five Questionnaire* (BFQ), the *Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form* (TEIQue-SF), and the *Human Capital Sustainability Leadership Scale* (HCSLS). The results showed that trait emotional intelligence explained additional variance in HCSL beyond personality traits. These findings suggest the relevance of trait emotional intelligence for promoting advanced leadership styles in organizations.

## Keywords

Trait emotional intelligence, Human capital sustainability leadership, Personality traits, Workers.

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# Human capital sustainability leadership nei lavoratori: Dai tratti di personalità all'intelligenza emotiva

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## Sommario

Questo studio ha esaminato le relazioni tra *Trait Emotional Intelligence* e *Human Capital Sustainability Leadership*, controllando per i tratti di personalità. Duecentocinquantanove lavoratori italiani hanno compilato il *Big Five Questionnaire* (BFQ), il *Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form* (TEIQue-SF) e la *Human Capital Sustainability Leadership Scale* (HCSSL). I risultati hanno mostrato che la *Trait Emotional Intelligence* spiega una percentuale di varianza incrementale in relazione alla HCSSL oltre ai tratti di personalità. Questi risultati suggeriscono la rilevanza della *Trait Emotional Intelligence* per promuovere stili avanzati di leadership nelle organizzazioni.

## Parole chiave

*Trait emotional intelligence*, *Human capital sustainability leadership*, Tratti di personalità; Lavoratori.

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## Introduction

Over the past few years, growing attention has been given to the sustainable development of human resources as a key factor in fostering healthy organizations (Di Fabio, 2017a, 2024; Di Fabio et al., 2020; Peiró et al., 2019, 2021). This perspective has gained particular relevance within the framework of the Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development (PSSD) (Di Fabio, 2017b, 2021; Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018, 2023; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018, 2020; Rosen & Di Fabio, 2023). Positioned within the wider transdisciplinary Sustainability Science (Komiya & Takeuchi, 2006; Sahle et al., 2025; Takeuchi et al., 2017), this research and intervention area emphasizes the importance of applied psychological perspectives for understanding the processes that support sustainable development over time (Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018; Peiró, 2025; Peiró et al., 2025).

Within the framework of the PSSD, Di Fabio and Peiró (2018) proposed the concept of Human Capital Sustainability Leadership (HCSL). This approach emphasizes the importance of supporting both employee well-being and organizational health by creating work environments in which people can grow, remain resilient, and contribute to the organization's long-term success.

HCSL is conceived as a higher order construct that brings together four leadership styles: ethical, sustainable, mindful, and servant leadership. Ethical leadership considers principles such as fairness, transparency, and integrity, encouraging leaders to act consistently with shared organizational values and to treat others with respect. Sustainable leadership places greater emphasis on long-term organizational growth by fostering continuous learning, valuing diversity, and investing in the development and protection of workers, environments, and the planet. Mindful leadership relates to remaining aware and emotionally balanced in the present moment, particularly when facing demanding or stressful situations, allowing leaders to better understand the effects of their actions on others. Servant leadership focuses primarily on supporting followers' growth and well-being, reflecting an authentic commitment to the flourishing of followers that extends beyond the achievement of organizational goals due to a moral responsibility.

HCSL represents an advanced leadership perspective that is relevant not only for individuals occupying formal managerial positions, but also for employees who take on influential roles informally within organizations (Peiró et al. 2023). Informal leaders are generally understood as individuals who, despite lacking formal authority, are recognized by colleagues for their ability to motivate, support, and guide others in work-related activities (Lawson et al., 2020). Thus, HCSL can be interpreted both as a vertical leadership approach associated with managerial responsibilities and as a horizontal form of leadership that may emerge across different organizational roles, contributing to stronger collaboration and improved organizational functioning (Peiró et al., 2023). In terms of

horizontal leadership, the value of Human Capital Sustainability Leadership in relationships with coworkers must be underlined and with it the importance of providing early opportunities to develop it in a preventative perspective not only in the early stages of one's work path but also at university (Peiró et al., 2023).

Previous research on HCSL has examined its associations as a dependent variable with both hedonic well-being (Palazzeschi & Di Fabio, 2026) and eudaimonic well-being (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018; Peiró et al., 2023). As an independent variable, HCSL has been studied with several constructs, including intrapreneurial self-capital (Palazzeschi & Di Fabio, 2025), positive relational management (Di Fabio et al., 2023), empathy and compassion (Palazzeschi, 2026), and workplace relational civility (Di Fabio & Gori, 2021), while controlling for the effect of personality traits. Findings from these studies suggest that personality characteristics alone are not sufficient to fully account for HCSL. This indicates that additional personal resources, particularly those involving emotional and relational dimensions, may provide further explanatory value. In this regard, emotional intelligence could represent a promising construct in relation to HCSL.

Furthermore, within the perspective of the Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development, increasing attention has been devoted to strength-based approaches to prevention (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021) as well as to primary prevention strategies (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016; Hage et al., 2007). These perspectives emphasize the importance of recognizing and enhancing personal resources and individual strengths before difficulties emerge. Applied to organizational contexts, this approach suggests that promoting workers' strengths through preventive interventions may contribute to improving increasable psychological resources (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021) and, consequently, to fostering healthier (Di Fabio et al., 2000) and more sustainable organizations (Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023).

From this perspective, emotional intelligence appears to be a particularly relevant resource because, unlike traditionally stable personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), it can be strengthened and developed through specific training programs and interventions (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2011).

Research on emotional intelligence traditionally distinguishes between two main theoretical perspectives (Stough et al., 2009): ability-based models and trait-based models. Ability-based models, such as that proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997), conceptualize emotional intelligence as a set of cognitive-emotional abilities related to understanding and managing emotions. Trait-based models, on the other hand, focus more on individuals' perceptions of their own emotional competencies and include approaches such as Bar-On's (1997) self-reported emotional intelligence and Petrides and Furnham's (2001) trait emotional intelligence. The present study adopts the model developed by Petrides and Furnham (2001), as it offers a broader conceptualization of emotional intelligence by incorporating dimensions such as emotional expression, emotion regulation, and self-motivation, extending beyond

the aspects considered in Bar-On's model. According to Petrides and Furnham (2021), trait emotional intelligence is organized into four dimensions: well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability. The well-being dimension reflects a generally positive and confident outlook on life. Individuals with high levels in this dimension tend to experience greater fulfillment and emotional positivity in everyday life. The self-control dimension refers to the perception of being capable of regulating emotions, managing impulses, and coping effectively with stress and external demands. High self-control is associated with emotional balance and the perception of being capable of responding to challenging situations in a calm and adaptive manner, without becoming either emotionally overwhelmed or excessively restrained. The Emotionality dimension concerns perceiving, understanding, and expressing emotions, both one's own and those of others. This dimension also includes emotional sensitivity, which supports the development and maintenance of close, meaningful interpersonal relationships. The sociability dimension reflects confidence and effectiveness in social interactions. High sociability regards the perception of possessing strong communication abilities, active listening skills, and confidence in engaging with others across a variety of social contexts.

Several studies have explored the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and different leadership styles, consistently highlighting the contribution of emotional intelligence to effective leadership processes (Barling et al., 2000; Mandell & Pherwani, 2003; Siegling et al., 2014), and also considering the possible effect of personality traits (Andrei et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2023). Interest in studying trait emotional intelligence in relation to HCSL has emerged (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2023), but this relationship deserves to be studied more thoroughly, also controlling for personality traits, to better understand the potential of emotions in promoting leadership for the sustainable development of human resources.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to analyze the relationships between trait emotional intelligence and HCSL, controlling for the effect of personality traits.

The hypotheses were as follows:

- *H1*. A positive relationship will emerge between trait emotional intelligence and HCSL.
- *H2*. Trait emotional intelligence will account for an additional percentage of variance in HCSL beyond that explained by personality traits.

## Method

### *Participants*

Two hundred and fifty-nine Italian workers with a mean age 45.89 years ( $SD = 11.09$ ). Among them, 39.97% are males and 60.03% female.

## Measures

*Big Five Questionnaire* (BFQ; Caprara et al., 1993). It includes 132 items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *Absolutely false* to 5 = *Absolutely true*). The five dimensions are: Extraversion («I find it easy to talk to people I don't know»), Cronbach's alpha .81; Agreeableness («If necessary, I don't shy away from helping strangers»), Cronbach's alpha .71; Conscientiousness («I tend to be very thoughtful»), Cronbach's alpha .81; Emotional Stability («I do not often feel tense»), Cronbach's alpha .90; Openness («I am always informed about what is happening in the world»), Cronbach's alpha .75.

*The Trait Emotion Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form* (TEIQue-SF; Petrides, 2009; Italian version Di Fabio & Palazzeschi, 2011). It includes 30 items on a Likert scale from 1 *Completely disagree* to 7 = *Completely agree*; Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients: .82 for Well-being dimension («I feel that I have a number of good qualities»), .80 for Self-control dimension («I'm usually able to find ways to control my emotions when I want to»), .81 for Emotionality dimension («Expressing my emotions with words is not a problem for me»), .82 for Sociability dimension («I can deal effectively with people»), .81 for the total score.

*Human Capital Sustainability Leadership Scale* (HCSLS; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018). It includes 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Very much*). Higher-order construct including four specific leadership styles: ethical («I act by giving an example of doing tasks in an ethically correct manner»), sustainable («I leave out the superfluous by focusing the resources on the crucial aspects of work»), mindful («I put myself in the shoes of my collaborators when they are doing tasks»), servant leadership («I commit myself so my collaborators have all the information to work to the best»). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the HCSLS was .94.

## Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaires during group sessions after providing informed consent to participate. All study procedures complied with Italian regulations concerning data protection and privacy. To reduce potential order effects, the sequence in which the questionnaires were administered was varied across participants.

## Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation analyses, and hierarchical regression methods using IBM SPSS Statistics software.

## Results

Table 1 shows the correlations among BFQ, TEIQue-SF dimensions, and HCSSL.

**Table 1**

Correlations among BFQ, TEIQue-SF dimensions, and HCSSL

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. BFQ Extraversion	–									
2. BFQ Agreeableness	.15*	–								
3. BFQ Conscientiousness	.23**	.10	–							
4. BFQ Emotional stability	.16*	.15*	.09	–						
5. BFQ Openness	.41**	.38**	.29**	.22**	–					
6. TEIQue-SF Well-being	.28**	.10	.32**	.38**	.27**	–				
7. TEIQue-SF Self-control	.16*	.04	.28**	.49**	.11	.49**	–			
8. TEIQue-SF Emotionality	.12	.49**	.20**	.21**	.32**	.41**	.30**	–		
9. TEIQue-SF Sociability	.47**	.10	.34**	.20**	.35**	.46**	.41**	.41**	–	
10. HCSSL	.14*	.40**	.31**	.11	.41**	.42**	.26**	.49**	.24**	–

Note.  $N = 259$ . \*  $< .05$ , \*\*  $< .01$ .

BFQ = *Big Five Questionnaire*

TEIQue-SF = *Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form*

HCSSL = *Human Capital Sustainability Leadership Scale*

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with HCSSL as the dependent variable. Personality traits (BFQ) entered at Step 1 explained 28% of the variance in HCSSL. When Trait emotional intelligence dimensions were added at Step 2, the model remained significant and accounted for an additional 13% of the variance (total  $R^2 = .41$ ) (Table 2).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between Trait emotional intelligence and HCSSL, controlling for the effects of personality traits. The results showed that Trait emotional intelligence was positively associated with HCSSL (H1) and explained additional variance beyond personality traits (H2). These findings suggest that Trait emotional intelligence contributes to HCSSL over the personality traits, highlighting the importance of perceived experience of emotional fulfillment, emotional self-regulation, emotional awareness, and interpersonal emotional effectiveness in fostering HCSSL.

**Table 2**

Hierarchical Regression. The Contribution of Personality Traits (BFQ) and Trait emotional intelligence dimensions to Human Capital Sustainability Leadership

	$\beta$
<i>Step 1</i>	
BFQ Extraversion	.15*
BFQ Agreeableness	.30**
BFQ Conscientiousness	.22**
BFQ Emotional Stability	.18*
BFQ Openness	.24**
<i>Step 2</i>	
TEIQue-SF Well-being	.25**
TEIQue-SF Self-control	.15*
TEIQue-SF Emotionality	.26**
TEIQue-SF Sociability	.13*
$R^2$ step 1	.28***
$\Delta R^2$ step 2	.13***
$R^2$ total	.41***

Note.  $N = 259$ . \*  $< .05$ , \*\*  $< .01$ .

BFQ = Big Five Questionnaire

TEIQue-SF = Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire Short Form

HCSLS = Human Capital Sustainability Leadership Scale

More specifically, in the present study, the dimensions of TEIQue-SF Emotionality and TEIQue-SF Well-being emerged as the most relevant components of trait emotional intelligence in relation to HCSL. Overall, these results suggest that the perception of understanding and responding effectively to emotions, together with a positive sense of perceived personal emotional fulfillment, could encourage leadership approaches that foster the sustainable development of human capital within organizations (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2023). Although the present study yielded encouraging findings, some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the participants cannot be considered fully representative of the broader Italian workforce.

Future research could extend this line of investigation by examining the associations between trait emotional intelligence and HCSL in employees from a wider range of occupational contexts in Italy. A further limitation concerns

the cross-sectional design of the study, which does not allow conclusions about causal relationships among the variables examined. Longitudinal research would therefore be important in clarifying the direction of these associations over time. Furthermore, path analysis models could be employed to further explore the relationships among these variables. In addition, studies conducted in different cultural contexts could provide useful insights into possible cross-cultural similarities and/or differences.

If future studies replicate these findings, important implications could emerge for preventive approaches, particularly within primary prevention (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016; Kenny & Hage, 2009; Hage et al., 2007) and strengths-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021). Differently from personality traits, which are typically regarded as relatively stable across time (Costa & McCrae, 1992), trait emotional intelligence includes characteristics that can be cultivated and strengthened through specific trainings.

Furthermore, strengthening trait emotional intelligence may represent an important pathway for fostering leadership styles oriented toward the sustainability of human capital. Moreover, promoting HCSL could serve as a valuable organizational resource for supporting healthy organizations (Di Fabio, 2017a, 2024; Di Fabio et al., 2020; Peiró et al., 2019, 2021), with positive implications for employee well-being, resilience, and engagement among both leaders and employees, thereby contributing to the development of more sustainable work environments (Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2023).

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