



## Emotional Intelligence Coaching as the Anchor for Connecting a Multigenerational Workplace

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# Emotional Intelligence Coaching As The Anchor For Connecting A Multigenerational Workplace

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## Abstract

This study aimed to devise a novel coaching model linked with emotional intelligence (EI) within a workplace with multigenerational employees, making use of action research methodology. The present Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (VUCA) environment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) and the multi-generational workforce, posed unique challenges for leadership at a civil engineering organisation in South Africa. These challenges necessitate adaptable and resilient leadership capabilities. Several theories were explored namely, social exchange theory, self-determination theory, Kurt Lewin leadership styles framework, Goleman's Emotional Leadership Theory as well as the existential coaching methodological approach. This mix enabled the interpretation of behaviours and processes within the coaching domain. The primary data collection entailed interviews, focus groups and observation. The sample size of the interviews was 17 and 10 for focus group one, and 11 for focus group two. The model that was created as a result of this research, integrates emotional intelligence frameworks and coaching theories to address these leadership needs. By advancing emotional intelligence among leaders, the model aims to improve leaders' adaptability and interpersonal effectiveness amidst rapid organisational and global changes. The implementation of this coaching model is expected to bridge generational gaps and enhance leadership efficacy in navigating the complexities of the current era.

Keywords: Civil engineering; Coaching; Emotional intelligence; Leadership, Multigenerational employees

## 1. Introduction

The topic under discussion led to an exploration of the literature on leadership management theories, emotional intelligence models, coaching models, and a multigenerational workforce. The strategy used in this research was a case study using action research to gain primary data from the company and to develop a coaching model. A qualitative study was conducted to determine if such a model could connect the multigenerational employees (silent generation, baby boomers, Gen X) and the younger generation (millennials and Gen Z).

Leading a multigenerational team is a challenging task, it requires leaders to follow an effective leadership style and acquire skills to lead the team successfully. A coaching model linked with emotional intelligence coaching enabled, through action learning and qualitative techniques, was implemented to determine if such a model could connect the multigenerational employees, silent generation, baby boomers, Gen X and the younger generation, millennials and Gen Z.

The case study for this research was a civil engineering company based in KwaZulu -Natal, South Africa. For ease of reference, in this article, the company has been coded as PCEC. The Executive Leadership Team in the company needed to cultivate a robust pipeline of future leaders from a multigenerational workforce to remain competitive. In turn, these executive leaders needed to be coached on cultivating millennial leaders as future leaders to deliver its “next generation” of leaders. The case study highlights that the expression and appraisal of emotions, use of emotions in decision-making and enhancing the cognitive process, emotional knowledge and management of moods or emotions were critical aspects of emotional intelligence observed at the company.

There have been considerable shifts in society, from the level of organisations to individuals, through the COVID-19 pandemic, as such creating unprecedented global social and economic crises (Chong et al. 2020; Gallup 2020). This has introduced significant uncertainties into familiar structures, and has further caused major changes in, and uncertainty about, the underpinnings of corporations and society that resilient leaders must navigate (Renjin 2020). These shifts include virtual work, virtual studies and learning to work and engage remotely. It was suggested that leaders must have good communication skills, be mindful of situations, and be able to handle change in uncertain conditions while still behaving ethically during and after the pandemic (Chen and Sripthon 2021). Leaders need to make high-impact decisions in a limited information-setting and to provide direction for their team. The pandemic has affected the workforce, and no leader is unaffected.

## **2. Research aim and objective**

The study aimed to devise a novel coaching model linked with emotional intelligence (EI) within a workplace with multigenerational employees and investigate leadership coaching readiness at the executive level of an engineering company based in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The research objective was framed as follows: to design an innovative, bespoke coaching model for the leadership of a company in order to enhance their emotional intelligence and bridge the multigenerational gap. This would strengthen people’s competencies not only on a personal level but also at the organisation level.

## **3. Literature review**

### **3.1 Leadership**

Leadership was defined as not a person, and is different from management (Renjin 2020). Additionally, leadership values appear under scrutiny during times of crisis and significant disruption (Roberts 2020). This author further explored personal values, and the decision-

making skills leaders must acquire. Also, it was posited that strong leadership skills are imperative during a pandemic such as COVID-19 (Al Saidi et al. 2020). Three main leadership styles are identified by the model created in the late 1930s by the pioneering social psychologist Kurt Lewin, namely; authoritarian, participatory, and delegative. There has been many discussions around leadership styles and adaptations from Lewin’s style. Through exploration of situational leadership, it was postulated that there was a need for leaders to be flexible and adjust their style to the level of their team (Thompson and Glasø 2018). Nevertheless, based on the situation and the particular demands of the team, the efficacy of each style may differ. Leadership further is an influence relationship between a colleague and a leader with an intent for change that benefits both parties (Renjin 2020). The author also proposed four critical components that are required, namely, (1) the relationship is centred on influence, (2) leaders and colleagues are persons in this association, (3) leaders and colleagues have intent on true change, and (4) leaders and colleagues create reciprocal purposes.

Leadership at the PCEC Levels of management as indicated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Levels of management

Level	Description
Top-level management	The most senior level of management in the company and responsible for setting the overall route and strategy of the company. Top-level managers include executives such as the Chief Executive Officers, Chief Financial Officers, and Chief Operations Officers. They are typically responsible for making significant decisions that affect the entire organisation.
Senior management	This management level is below top level and includes managers who oversee specific functions or departments within the organisation. Senior managers are responsible for implementing the strategies set by top-level management and are typically involved in making decisions that affect their specific areas of responsibility and translates the overall business strategy into Business Plans for Business Units / Functional Units.
Mid-Management (Professional)	This level of management is responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations within the organisation. They are also responsible for managing and supervising the employees within their department or function. Their primary focus is ensuring that their area of responsibility runs efficiently and effectively in support of the organisation's overall goals and objectives—professional knowledge of subdiscipline/discipline.

Source: Adapted from (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020, pp.124-151)

### 3.1.2 Factors impacting leadership: global challenges

Leadership is dynamic and ever-changing in the current context globally. Globally, organisations have been impacted by social and geopolitical challenges (Ramphela 2023). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted leaders, employees, and communities in South Africa and globally. No leader is unaffected by COVID-19 and its impact, and this pandemic has brought an economic and health crisis. Strong leadership skills are imperative during a pandemic, such as COVID-19 (Al Saidi et al. 2020). The authors posited that Geopolitical challenges such as trade disputes, economic sanctions, or political instability can make it difficult for organisations to develop and execute long-term strategic plans. Top management may need to adjust their plans to account for changing market conditions or regulatory environments, which can be time-consuming and resource intensive. Such challenges have set leaders in a VUCA landscape. The company studied in this research has had to deal with the global pandemic with a multigenerational workforce and is now facing a working environment impacted by the 5<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (5IR).

### 3.1.3 Factors impacting leadership

Leaders face the growing use of digital technologies, tools, and platforms to perform work-related tasks and activities. The fourth and fifth industrial revolutions (4IR and 5IR) are rapidly dictating the need for individuals and organisations to acquire new skills and capabilities enabling adaptability to the changing nature of work and fully realise the benefits of the digital economy. This trend has been driven by advancements in areas such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud computing, big data analytics, and Internet of Things (IoT), which have enabled new ways of working and transformed traditional business models, thus changing the nature of people's work, how people interact with each other, efficiencies and innovation (Lorenz et al. 2015). Extraordinary leadership at all organisational layers is urgently required (Ashford and DeRue 2012).

It was further noted that strong leadership skills are imperative during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Al Saidi et al. 2020). Strong leadership skills include communicating effectively, making sound decisions under pressure, demonstrating empathy and compassion, building trust and collaboration, and adapting to rapidly changing circumstances (Avolio and Yammarino 2020). Effective leaders may also possess qualities such as resilience, creativity, and a willingness to take calculated risks (Boin and Hart 2019). These skills are essential for leaders to provide direction, stability, and support to their teams and communities during challenging times helping them traverse through the uncertainties and complexities of a crisis (Liu et al. 2020). Leadership values also come under scrutiny during times of crisis and significant disruption (Roberts 2020).

It was explored and discussed that leadership skills require self-awareness, relationship capacity and the ability to manage information through the lens of others (Bleich et al. 2021). Leadership qualities of good communication experiences is an important leadership skill (Hargrove 2015). It was further argued that critical thinking is an essential leadership skill, as well as good people skills and leadership skills for advancing one's career. Many of these skills and values are directly linked to leaders' emotional intelligence (Farr and Brazil 2019).

The current context of the case study is shared leadership within a multigenerational workforce with project and sector teams. Through research the authors mentioned that shared leadership is considered group-oriented leadership (Martins and Martins 2019). It was also affirmed that "the tendency around the last half-century has been away from the focus of power on one individual but toward increasing the capability for leadership at the top levels of corporations" (O'Toole et al. 2002) (p. 67). In this current case study, shared leadership is evident, and knowledge sharing in multigenerational work groups is considered essential.

Shared leadership, as suggested, refers to the distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities among team members, which has been found to positively impact knowledge sharing in multigenerational work groups (Hoch et al. 2010). The authors further postulate that when team members feel empowered to contribute to the leadership of a group, they are more likely to share knowledge and collaborate effectively. Additionally, emotional intelligence, which involves the ability to recognise and manage one's own emotions and those of others, is an important factor in facilitating knowledge sharing in diverse work groups (Carmeli and Josman 2006). Leaders that encompass high emotional intelligence are better equipped to foster positive relationships among team members, which can enhance trust and

facilitate open communication, leading to more effective knowledge sharing (Jordan and Troth, 2019).

A discussion was held with the participants disseminating the broad range of results of leaders and leadership pipeline model as cited in (Charan et al. 2011). The broad range of results of leaders' model suggested levels that leadership had to progress through determined by job roles. This would then give insight into leader's potential for the next level of leadership and succession management. It was suggested that turn potential meant leaders were able to do the work at the next level in 1 to 2 years. Growth Potential meant leaders were able to do the work on larger projects at the same level in the near future and mastery potential suggested leaders were able to do the same kind of work currently being done, only even better

### 3.3 Emotional intelligence and the nexus with leadership

Emotional intelligence is a set of skills contributing to understanding and reflecting on emotions in oneself and others. Seminal EI theory began in the early 1990s by (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Daniel Goleman, an American psychologist, helped popularise emotional intelligence and noted five key elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In Goleman's book, the author suggested that emotional intelligence can be activated or deactivated. This, Goleman posits is a result of one's brain plasticity, in which inputs, ongoing practice, and deliberate learning lead to modifications and new connections. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to handle their emotions in a constructive manner, leading to improved problem-solving abilities and better management of obstacles (Salovey and Mayer 1990).

There are various emotional intelligence assessment models, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Emotional intelligence assessment models

Acronym	Full name	Developers
EQI	Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I)	Dr. Reuven Bar-On Bar-On, R. 2000
MSCEIT	Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI Test (MSCEIT)	John D. Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David R. Caruso 2002
SEI	The Six Second Emotional Intelligence Assessment (SEI)	Six Seconds a California-based 501©3 1997
GENOS	GENOS Emotional Intelligence Inventory	Dr. Ben Palmer and Dr. Con Stough 2004

Source: (Bar-On, 2000; Caruso, 2002; Palmer and Stough, 2004; Reuven, 2000; Mayer, et al., 2002)

The researchers used the GENOS Emotional Intelligence Assessment in the study. This assessment tool measures how well the participants demonstrate emotionally intelligent leadership competencies compared to others. The GENOS Model posits that behaviours, feelings and thoughts can be 'adjusted' by transmuted them into positive and productive characterisations. There are six competencies noted, namely, self-awareness, awareness of others, authenticity, emotional reasoning, self-management, and positive influence (Cignac, 2010; Palmer and Cignac, 2012).

### 3.4 Executive Coaching

Executive coaching is key to advancing leaders in engineering (MacIntyre 2016). Furthermore, executive coaching has been found to positively affect behaviours linked to managing, leading, and finding solutions within a challenging area (Ballesteros-Sanchez et al. 2019).

Executive coaching requires research and data to support this notion. Coaching in accordance to fit theories, considers coaching as a way to boost self-advocacy in stating the necessity for modifications to the place and flow of work, the modes of communication, and the use of technology. Therefore, coaching serves as an intervention tool (Doyle and Bradley 2023).

For leaders to adapt, change readiness must happen before and is not the actual change. Change readiness suggests that coachees are ready to contract on the change process. However, they will still be required to employ fundamental change (Theeboom et al. 2017; Triberti and Riva 2016). Numerous studies suggest a potential barrier to coaching could be the absence of support from the coachee's organisation (Athanasopoulou and Dopson 2018; Grover and Furnham 2016; MacKie, 2015).

Existential coaching, aimed at helping individuals find meaning, purpose, and authenticity in their personal and professional lives, delves into clients' core values and existential concerns such as freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and so forth (Spinelli 2007; van Deurzen 2012). Emphasising authenticity, encouraging coachees to accept their true selves free from societal pressures, and focuses on the present and future to advance a proactive life approach (Cooper 2015; Yalom 1980). Coaches employ existential inquiry and narrative techniques to help clients reflect on their existence and life stories, enhancing self-awareness and empowerment (Schneider and Krug 2010). Furthermore, through the observation in the participatory action research of the coaching it was evident self-determination and motivation is required. The self-determination theory (relatedness, competence, and autonomy requirements) has a significant impact on human motivation and is still a critical paradigm for human motivation. The applicability of the theory is highlighted in an organisational setting (Ryan and Deci 2023). This study demonstrates how meeting these demands results in increased job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and overall well-being.

### **3.5 Coaching Tools**

The traditional coaching one-to-one method was explored with the use of a profiling tool named Personal Development Analysis (PDA) as the basis of self-awareness and mapping the job role and competencies. PDA measures how one does what they do, how one adapts and responds to people and situations, and one's aptitudes (PDA International 2014).

The PDA profiling tool a reliable, scientifically validated instrument, similar to (D)ominance, (I)nfluence (S)teadiness and (C)onscientiousness (DiSC) which looks at behavioural traits and competencies of self and those required of the leadership role. PDA is based on the theory of personality proposed by Marston in 1926. The PDA tool has a self-control axis which indicates the ability of individuals to control their impulses and emotions, and a profile intensity indicator which helps to know the person's level of flexibility or rigidity and energy balance indicator which determines the person's motivation and stress levels.

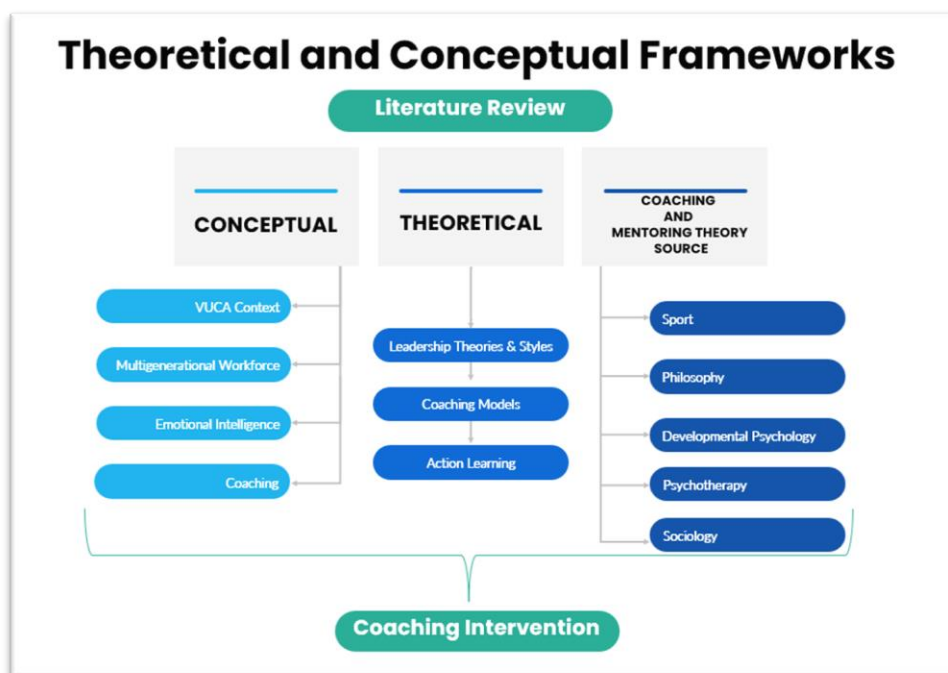
The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Tool was developed by Katherine Briggs and based on the typological theory of Carl G Jung and was first published in 1962. The MBTI measures how one behaves naturally, develops preferences, perceives the world, and makes decisions, whereas the PDA measures how one does what one does, how one adapts and responds to people and situations, and one's aptitudes. However, these tools do not address emotional

intelligence in depth, resulting in the need for specific emotional intelligence tools, such as the GENOS model discussed earlier.

The tools described above provided a starting point for understanding the skills required for leadership in the current unpredictable landscape, understanding a multigenerational workforce in the context of the case study, taking a deeper look at emotional intelligence, exploring the need for executive coaching, and determining which of the various coaching tools could be used in the coaching to develop leadership skills in a VUCA environment.

#### 4. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Figure 1 represents the conclusion of linking the conceptual, theoretical, and coaching and mentoring frameworks into one diagram. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks improved the objectivity and reliability of the research process throughout the literature review. These frameworks provided the research design, data collecting, and analysis with a defined structure, ensuring the study was methodical and coherent and lastly provide the research with a prism through which to study and comprehend the gathered data, enabling the researcher reach relevant conclusions as corroborated in (Saunders et al. 2012).



**Figure 1:** Linking the conceptual, theoretical, and coaching and mentoring frameworks into one diagram,

Source: Authors

#### 5. Research methodology

##### 5.1 Qualitative research



The research philosophy adopted in this study was based on phenomenological ontology. Working from a case study perspective and a qualitative phenomenological ontology, enabled the exploration and understanding of the participants lived experiences and the summation they derived from the experience. Ontology is posited as the reality (Cohen et al. 2018). Qualitative research can be a powerful tool for acquiring deep knowledge of complex social phenomena and exploring diverse perspectives and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The strategy employed in this study was a case study using action research to obtain primary data in the company and to develop a coaching model. Action research is a useful tool for practitioners and stakeholders, such as coaches and their clients, to address practical problems in their practice or organisation, to improve outcomes, and empower themselves in the research process (McNiff and Whitehead 2018). Action research allowed the researcher to Act, Observe, Reflect and Change the model required. Furthermore, action research studies can vary in length, complexity, and process (Johnson 2008). In the current study, this process was pre-planned and systematic. The suggested five integral steps in action research covers: choose the appropriate data collection method; collect and analyse data; decide how the results can be applied; communicate results and form an action plan with others (Johnson 2008). Authorisation was attained from the organisation being studied ahead of the study and all participants gave consent to be part of the study. Additionally, the researcher gained ethical clearance from the University. Anonymity was maintained through all participants allocated a participant number to ensure they could not be identified.

**Table 3:** The steps in the action research undertaken in the research study

<b>Johnson's steps</b>	<b>Application</b>
Choosing the appropriate data collection method	A case study design was used using action research. Action research was critical in delivering and finetuning the coaching methodology and tools used throughout the process.
Collect and analyse data.	PDA and GENOS were used to collect data for the coachee during the coaching sessions. 1:1 interviews and focus groups were employed to gather data for the qualitative study. The interviews had a duration ranging from thirty to forty-five minutes in length. Emotional Intelligence Workshops were facilitated for understanding around emotional intelligence. Observation was used during coaching sessions for the qualitative study. The Nvivo Software tool was used during the analysis stage.
Decide how the results can be applied.	The qualitative data collection allowed the collection of non-numeric and intangible data, which assisted the researcher in exploring the research questions and to gain insight into the answering of the research objectives.
Communicate results	Discussions in the focus groups around results and interviews corroborated the results.
Form an action plan with others.	In terms of the coaching, personal development plans were formulated with each participant. Leadership on the bases of the results that saw in terms of the coachee's progression, embraced the importance of coaching in the workplace.

**Source: Adapted from (Johnson 2008, p.36 )**

## 5.2 Case study design

A case study design involves an in-depth analysis of a single case or a small number of cases, such as an individual, group, organisation, community, or event (Yin 2018). The case study for this research was a civil engineering company based in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. For ease of reference, in this article, the company has been coded as PCEC. The PCEC has had

exponential growth since 2014. It has a multigenerational workforce consisting of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X and Millennials, also known as Gen Y and then Gen Zs. Each generation brings its own perspective in terms of thinking into the workplace.

The PCEC has 177 employees and a lean top and senior management structure. In addition to this growth, industry demands require employees to have professional registration, particularly with the Engineering Council of South Africa. The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Gen X are required to fast-track and mentor the Millennials to become professionally registered. The entry into the market in terms of SMMEs and the tendering process has increased competition dramatically. Currently, competitive advantage is leaning away from the development of unique technical skills towards the development of skilled human capital, efficiencies, quality, and retention. Every generation is greatly influenced by issues pertaining to the economics, science, technology, politics, social development, and other elements in determining their perspectives and the features of their workplace (Williams and Page, 2011). In light of these variations, leaders are urged to become knowledgeable about and comprehend these elements in order to effectively guide each generational cohort.

The study sample consisted of participants placed on the coaching programme as well as those in management positions and millennial employees. The researcher opted to use the PDA as a tool for the case study as it indicates both natural and role (job) behaviour, energy balance, and self-control (EQ factor). In addition, GENOS Emotional Intelligence Assessments were completed. The GENOS tool concentrates solely on the six competencies of emotional intelligence and does not factor in behavioural traits for the job role, so combined with the PDA added more depth in the awareness of self for coachees'. These Coachees' also undertook Artificial Intelligence (AI) coaching after the one-to-one coaching. Through the coaching and possible understanding of the EI competencies, participants began to reflect and understand the differences in the generations among the employees and adapt their communication styles, leadership styles and ways of engaging in order to connect the multigenerational workforce.

Emotional Intelligence workshops formed part of the coaching model. The individual interviews and focus groups were held with participants from the varied multigenerational workforce.

The observation during the coaching intervention had the express purpose of gathering data regarding the coaching intervention and its tools in order to create a model unique to the organisation under study. The usage of the platform for the artificial intelligence coaching tool and the participants' use of it, as well as their preferences, were taken into consideration. This included observation of the participants' activities following the coaching session and how they carried them out. In order to determine whether these observations regarding the application of emotional intelligence techniques following workshops and discussions in coaching feedback sessions were important to the coaching model and pertinent to the organisation under study. Emotional intelligence was also considered in the focus groups in terms of relevance and addition to the coaching model.

## 6. Findings and discussion

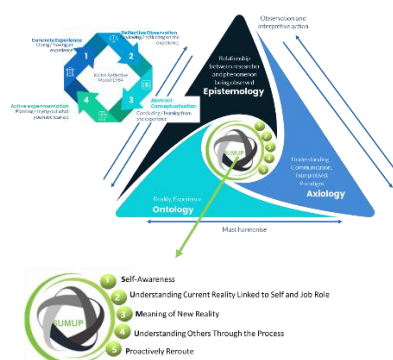
Participants iterated that emotional awareness of others, self-awareness and the skills of empathy and emotional reasoning about a situation was realised through coaching. Coaching provides the individual with a greater sense of self-awareness (Solomon and Collier-Peter 2019). Skills that emanated from the semi-structured interviews were the following, namely, emotional reasoning, empathy and self-regulation, efficiencies, teamwork, and communication.

As cited by the World Economic Forum in 2020, the top 10 skills for 2025 are leadership and social influence, which encompasses EI attributes (WEF 2020). It was posited that millennials require to develop and enhance communication skills (Rose and Gordon 2015). Poor intergenerational communication often sees this requirement go unheard. There is a clear relationship between EI and communication skills which has positive outcomes for teamwork and relationship-building between generations (Hendon et al. 2017).

Coaching has been found to correlate directly with employees' motivation, engagement and satisfaction (Baran 2017). Coaching a leader increases their capacity to handle and deal with stress and learn constantly (Gyllensten and Palmer 2014). This corroborates with the participant feedback, that iterated coaching helps in creating synchronisation within the organisation and assists in increasing maturity level, whether it is senior or younger leadership. Coaching and developing of self and the opportunity to learn from the older generation, can result in employee retention. This retention could be part of the organisation's strategy to retain and develop employees professionally.

## 7. The Coaching Model

Through investigating the current state of leadership interventions and behaviour in the context of a multigenerational workforce at the PCEC, the researchers were able to develop a bespoke coaching model named SUMUP as represented in Figure 2 below. This model combined an emotional intelligence aspect.



**Figure 2:** The coaching model crafted: Source Leadership Coaching in a Multigenerational Workforce.

Sources: Authors

The model for PCEC was developed through combining existing models, namely the PDA tool, together with the Broad Range of Results of Leadership Competencies, the GENOS Emotional Intelligence Tool and one-to-one coaching with a credentialed coach using results coaching as well as delivering emotional intelligence workshops. A personal development plan was crafted for each coachee. The coaching and mentoring framework theories explored were grounded in philosophy, developmental psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, and sport coaching.

## **8. Conclusion**

The action research conducted in this particular company, provided the research study with a case study perspective by means of emotional intelligence coaching among a multi-generational workforce. Through the action research cycles, observation and reflection, the researcher, was able to improve upon the coaching model and the interventions enabled the creation of a coaching model suitable for the PCEC.

The set of recommendations arising from this research, indicate that the PCEC should use the bespoke coaching model in order to continue improve performance due to the strong focus on EI workshops. In addition, the PCEC should introduce team coaching interventions to bring together the multigenerational workforce into one group. This would enable all the individuals to build their relationships, the understanding and learning aspects to ensure transfer of knowledge and skills occurs thus enabling the younger generation to work toward being professionally registered while further enhancing employee engagement resulting in retention. Integrating mentoring initiatives within the coaching model could further improve the programme.

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