

# Enabling Employee Engagement In Lagos' Private Secondary Schools: Do Emotional Intelligence and Team-Building Competencies in Middle-Level Leaders Matter?

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## Abstract

*In Nigeria's private secondary schools, employee engagement is often undermined by low morale, limited support, and fragmented workplace culture. While principals typically receive attention as the main agents of change, this study shifts focus to middle-level leaders, such as heads of departments, subject heads, housemasters and housemistresses, whose everyday interactions with staff position them as vital but understudied contributors to school effectiveness. The study aimed to explore whether emotional intelligence and team-building competencies in these middle leaders influence employee engagement in selected government-approved private secondary schools in Lagos State. Using a cross-sectional survey of 582 teaching and non-teaching staff across 18 schools, data were analyzed with Hayes' PROCESS macro to assess direct and mediating effects. Results showed that both emotional intelligence and team-building competencies had significant positive effects on employee engagement. Notably, team-building competency also mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and engagement. The findings suggest that building the emotional and relational capacities of middle leaders can foster a more supportive and engaged school workforce. The study recommends leadership development strategies that incorporate emotional intelligence and team-building training to maximise staff commitment and school performance. This study is unique in its empirical focus on middle-level leadership within Nigeria's secondary education system, an area that has received limited scholarly attention despite its growing relevance.*

**Keywords:** *Emotional intelligence, Team-building competency, Employee engagement, Middle-level leaders, Private secondary schools*

## Introduction

Effective school leadership is crucial for student outcomes and school performance. However, Nigeria's secondary education sector suffers from chronic underfunding and a demotivated workforce that feels unsupported and undervalued, leading to widespread disengagement (Ogunboode, 2022; Zhenseh, Gani & Ogundobe, 2022).

Many Western countries have implemented reforms to strengthen accountability in school leadership (Day, Sammons & Gorgen, 2020). In Nigeria, school improvement efforts focus primarily on principals (Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022), even though secondary schools rely on middle-level leaders (e.g., assistant principals and department heads) for academic and administrative duties. These middle leaders are vital to motivating and engaging their teams (Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Lamanna, 2021).

Emotional intelligence is a leadership competency that enables leaders to manage their own and others' emotions, fostering a supportive, empathetic school culture (Gómez-Leal, Holzer, Bradley, Fernández-Berrocal & Patti, 2022). Likewise, team-building skills foster trust, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among staff, which boosts employee engagement (Ginting, Mahiranissa, Bekti & Febriansyah, 2020; Mughal, 2020; Raymond, 2023).

How these two competencies jointly affect employee engagement at the middle-leadership level remains underexplored. Studies from Western settings highlight the contributions of middle-level leaders to school improvement (Bento, Adenusi & Khanal, 2023; De Nobile, 2018; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Petrie & Nicholas, 2023; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Ronnerman., 2019), but little is known about how their team-building skills influence employee engagement (Ginting *et al.*, 2020; Mughal, 2020; Raymond, 2023).

Moreover, while many studies link school leadership to employees' attitudes and behaviours (Astuti, Fitria & Rohana, 2020; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020; Goestjahjanti *et al.*, 2020; Gómez-Leal *et al.*, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2021), the specific interplay of emotional intelligence and team-building in driving engagement is not well understood. This gap is important in Nigeria's secondary schools, where low employee engagement is widespread (Ogunboode, 2022; Zhenseh, Gani & Ogundobe, 2022). Improving secondary school middle-level leaders' emotional intelligence and team-building competencies could boost staff morale, enhance educational quality, and contribute to broader development goals in Nigeria.

This study, set in government-approved secondary schools in Eti-Osa, Lagos State, Nigeria, aims to investigate whether middle-level leaders' emotional intelligence and team-building competencies positively influence employee engagement and whether team-building competency mediates this relationship. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the relationship between middle-level leaders' emotional intelligence competency and employee engagement.
- ii. Examine the relationship between middle-level leaders' team-building competency and employee engagement.
- iii. Determine whether team-building competency mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence competency and employee engagement.
- iv. Investigate whether employee engagement levels differ for different levels of middle-level leaders' emotional intelligence and team-building competencies.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis Formation

This literature review critically engages with the conceptual foundations, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical evidence on emotional intelligence, team-building, and employee engagement, with a view to identifying gaps in existing scholarship and contextualising the relevance of these variables within secondary school leadership in Nigeria.

## ***Conceptual review***

### *Secondary School Middle-level Leadership*

Secondary school principals are the prime leaders overseeing academic and administrative functions (Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Bento, Adenusi & Khanal, 2023), and in Nigeria this role is emphasised as the key driver of school improvement (Ombuguhim, Husaina & Kazi, 2021; Ukeje & Aisiku, 2022). However, principals delegate responsibilities to middle-tier staff such as department heads, curriculum coordinators or house masters (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited [AITSL], 2023; Bento *et al.*, 2023; De Nobile, 2018; Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Petrie & Nicholas, 2023; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Ronnerman, 2019).

Meanwhile, defining middle-level leadership is challenging, since formal position-based definitions exclude informal teacher leaders (Lipscombe *et al.*, 2021; De Nobile, 2021). Middle leadership remains under-defined (Bento *et al.*, 2023) and under-researched despite the expanding responsibilities of these roles (De Nobile, 2018). The complexity of middle leaders' roles often leaves them feeling unprepared for heavy workloads and organisational change (Basset, 2016), underscoring the need to identify competencies for their success.

### *Leadership Competencies*

Swanson, Kim, Lee, Yang, and Lee (2020) defined leadership competencies as the expertise, skills, and behavioural qualities required of a leader, noting that effective leaders integrate cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence. These competencies generally reflect a leader's ability to think strategically, manage people effectively, communicate with clarity, and navigate complex interpersonal situations (Kin & Kareem, 2020). They also encompass a leader's capacity to motivate others, respond constructively to challenges, and model behaviours that strengthen organisational culture (Al-Ayed *et al.*, 2025).

Importantly, leadership competencies are not abstract traits but practical capabilities that shape how leaders influence, guide, and support their teams. In many developing settings, however, little is known about how these competencies translate into day-to-day leadership practice (Kin & Kareem, 2020), underscoring the need to identify exactly which capabilities help leaders drive meaningful change. Within this context, this study views and conceptualises employee engagement competency, emotional intelligence competency, and team-building competency as interconnected dimensions of leadership competencies, each representing a specific pathway through which middle-leaders can inspire engagement, strengthen relationships, enhance collective performance and enable other positive work attitudes and behavior such as commitment and dedication.

### *Employee Engagement Competency*

First introduced by Kahn (1990), the concept of employee engagement has attracted attention (Cassim, Botha, Botha & Bisschoff, 2024; Choudhary & Jain, 2024; Davis & Southey, 2024; Gede & Huluka, 2024; Hajjami & Crocco, 2024; Juba, 2024; Lee, Chong & Ojo, 2024; Yuwono, Qamari & Nuryakin, 2024). No single definition of engagement is universally accepted, and the concept has been examined through multiple lenses: job engagement (Eresia-Eke, Ndlovu, & Nyanga, 2023), social engagement (Boccoli, Gastaldi & Corso, 2023), work engagement (Yao,

Qiu, Yang, Han & Li, 2022) and organisational engagement (Udayangi & Perera, 2023), reflecting no consensus (Boccoli *et al.*, 2023). Kahn (1990) conceptualised engagement as the extent to which individuals immerse themselves in their roles physically, cognitively and emotionally. Other scholars define engagement as an employee's emotional connection and commitment to the organisation's mission (Koeswayo, Haryanto & Handoyo, 2024), a bond manifested in "go-the-extra-mile" effort (Shi, Chin & Adedapo, 2024).

### *Emotional Intelligence Competency*

Emotional intelligence (EI) emerged as a leadership attribute in the mid-1990s after Daniel Goleman popularised it (Bru-Luna, Martí-Vilar, Merino-Soto & Cervera-Santiago, 2021), and it is generally defined as the capacity to recognise and regulate one's own and others' emotions (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). Research indicates that leaders high in EI are adept at regulating their own and followers' emotions, helping them navigate social dynamics and build relationships (Kaur & Hirudayaraj, 2021; Reshetnikov *et al.*, 2020). Nieto-Carracedo, Gómez-Iniguez, Tamayo and Igartua (2024) conceptualised emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, use and manage emotions when processing information, solving problems and making decisions. However, some scholars question whether EI adds unique value to leadership effectiveness beyond cognitive or technical skills (Coronado-Maldonado & Benitez-Marquez, 2023).

Therefore, the study hypothesises that:

**H1:** Emotional intelligence competency directly predicts employee engagement.

### *Team-Building Competency*

Team-building competency improves workgroup performance through four processes (Ali, Li, Khan, Shah and Ulla, 2020): goal-setting, building trust and cohesion, defining roles, and problem-solving. Effective team-building can unite individuals into a cohesive unit (Ulabor *et al.*, 2020), establish roles aligned with group objectives (Demir & Ergun, 2023), and provide a supportive structure with norms and open communication (Kwon, 2024). However, focusing on internal team processes may overlook organisational factors such as culture, structure, or leadership style that significantly influence team dynamics.

Therefore, the study hypothesises that:

**H2:** Emotional intelligence competency directly predicts team building competency

**H3:** Team-building competency also directly predicts employee engagement.

**H4:** Team-building competency mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence competency and engagement.

## Theoretical Framework

Organisational Support Theory (OST) forms the theoretical foundation of this study. Developed by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1986) as an extension of Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, OST explains the reciprocal relationship between employees and their organisation. The core premise is that employees develop perceived organisational support (POS) based on how much they believe their organisation (through its leaders) cares about their well-being and values their contributions (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020). Employees gauge this support from management actions such as praise, recognition, fair treatment, and provision of resources. When employees perceive genuine support, it fulfills their socio-emotional needs for approval, belonging, and security (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger, Shanock & Wen, 2020), thereby reducing stress and improving satisfaction.

OST further posits that employees reciprocate high POS with positive work attitudes and behaviours that benefit the organisation. Studies show that feeling supported leads to greater engagement, commitment, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviours (Abdullahi *et al.*, 2024; Baran, Shanock & Miller, 2009; Rockstuhl *et al.*, 2020; Sato, 2014; Tan *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, OST has been widely applied in management research to explain employee attitudes across diverse contexts (Rockstuhl *et al.*, 2020; Abdullahi *et al.*, 2024; Tan *et al.*, 2024).

In educational settings, OST has helped explain how supportive school leadership drives teacher engagement (Carrell, Ellinger, Nimon, & Kim, 2022; Mbabazi, 2024; Mukandara & Dominic, 2024; Musenze, Mayende, Kalenzi, & Namono, 2022). School leaders (including middle-level managers) act as organisational representatives, and by providing resources, recognition, and fair treatment, they enhance teachers' POS. When teachers feel valued and supported by their school management, they respond with higher motivation, commitment, job satisfaction, and engagement, which benefits the overall school environment (Carrell *et al.*, 2022; Mbabazi, 2024; Mukandara & Dominic, 2024; Musenze *et al.*, 2022).

Despite its widespread use, OST is not without criticism. It has been faulted for focusing too narrowly on organisational support while neglecting other factors that shape employee behaviour (e.g., employees' dispositions, skills, and personalities) (Baran, Shanock, & Miller, 2009; Abdullahi *et al.*, 2024; Sato, 2014). Moreover, critics note that the employee-organisation relationship is complex and influenced by elements like leadership style and organisational justice that basic OST may overlook (Carrell *et al.*, 2022; Rockstuhl *et al.*, 2020). To address these concerns, researchers have expanded OST's scope to incorporate such factors, providing a more nuanced understanding of how support perceptions form and drive outcomes (Tan *et al.*, 2024; Carrell *et al.*, 2022).

For this study on middle-level leaders' emotional intelligence, team-building competency, and employee engagement in Nigerian private secondary schools, OST offers a pertinent lens. Middle-level leaders (such as department heads and housemasters) function as agents of the organisation in their daily interactions with staff. Their emotional intelligence and team-building efforts, such as showing empathy, fostering collaboration, and recognising achievements, bolster teachers' perceptions of support. In line with OST, when teachers feel cared for and valued by these leaders, they are more likely to be engaged and committed. Thus, applying OST in this

context highlights how strengthening middle leaders’ emotional and team-building competencies may enhance teacher engagement and foster a positive school environment.

**Conceptual Model for the Study**

The conceptual model for this study (Figure 1) proposes that middle-level leaders’ emotional intelligence competency shapes employee engagement in private secondary schools, but that this influence may depend on how effectively these leaders build and manage their teams. Emotional intelligence competency, reflected in leaders’ ability to recognise, regulate, and respond appropriately to emotions, is theorised to create the interpersonal conditions necessary for trust, psychological safety, and open communication. However, emotional intelligence alone may not fully translate into observable engagement outcomes unless it is channelled into concrete team processes.

In other words, middle-level leaders who are emotionally intelligent are more likely to establish cohesive teams, foster collaboration, and create a supportive work climate. These team-building behaviours can, in turn, enhance employees’ sense of belonging, shared purpose, and motivation, key drivers of engagement in school environments where relational dynamics strongly shape day-to-day experience. Thus, the model assumes that emotional intelligence enables stronger team-building practices, which then amplify or transmit its effect on employee engagement.

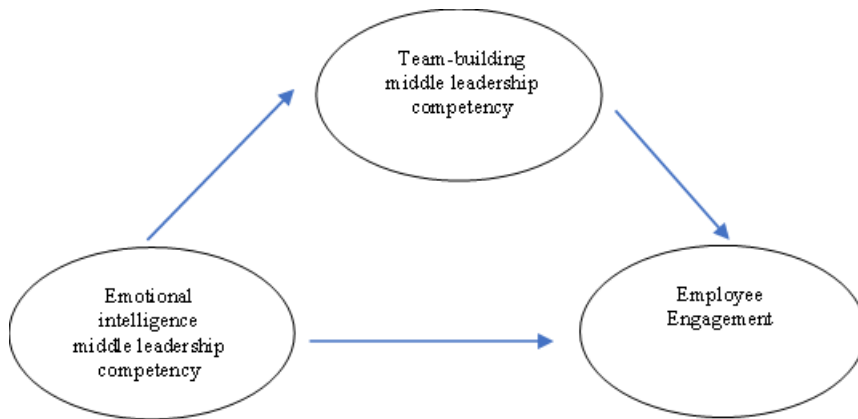


Figure 1: Research model

Source: The Authors (2025)

**Empirical Review**

The study by Raymond (2023) assessed the role of team-building activities on employee work attitudes and behaviour among organisations in Tanzania that are in the business of renewable energy. Raymond’s (2023) analysis of quantitative data collected from 114 valid participants using regression statistics showed team building activities enhanced work attitudes and behaviours in terms of communication engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and team lunch/dinner. The study therefore concluded that team-building activities motivate employee work attitudes and behaviour including employee engagement. Besides, Raymond (2023) recommended that

organisations should take adequate measures to engender team-building activities through communication engagement, problem-solving, and team lunches/dinners, among other activities.

Similarly, Mughal (2020) utilised a simple random sampling of lower and middle level managers in Karachi, Pakistan to identify team-building competency as a key determinant of employee engagement. The study found that to increase employee engagement, businesses might need to make investments in creating a work environment that fosters relationships among coworkers and encourages effective leadership and teamwork. However, to present a more comprehensive understanding, Mughal (2020) should have clarified why increases in employee engagement did not result in better employee performance.

Ginting, Mahinarissa, Bektı and Febriansyah's (2020) study which was based longitudinal experimental research strategy aimed to investigate the role of team-building competency experiential learning on acquiring the soft skills of ethics, communication, teamwork and leadership. Participants were MBA students drawn from Bandung, Indonesia. The analyses of findings showed that team-building competency experiential learning provided useful opportunity for developing the participants' soft skills of teamwork, communication, leadership, and ethics as well as their engagement, involvement, and contribution (performance). The study implied that to enhance employee engagement, involvement, and contribution, the organisation should institute experiential (i.e. on-the-job) leadership competency building activities that are tailored to the individual employee needs. However, Ginting *et al.* (2020) did not explore the impact of other leadership competencies on employee engagement such as emotional intelligence, coaching and conflict management which might provide much deeper insights.

Consequently, Alotaibi, Amin and Winterton (2020) examined the influence emotional intelligence and empowering leadership in engendering psychological empowerment and work engagement among employees in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study utilised quantitative approach to survey 500 participants from five privately owned health institutions. The findings established a statistically significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence, empowering leadership, psychological empowerment and work engagement. The study concluded that high emotional intelligence skills in employees along with empowering leadership enhanced psychological empowerment and work engagement. This implied that the recruitment and selection of highly emotionally intelligent employees along with empowering leadership would engender the psychological empowerment and work engagement needed by organisations to sustain competitive advantage.

Additionally, in light of the scant empirical evidence supporting the use of emotional intelligence for leadership in higher education, Asmamaw and Semela (2023) investigated Ethiopia's faculty views of leader emotional intelligence behaviour and its impact on engagement. The study found that aspects of emotional intelligence, such as empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationship management, were found to be particularly important leadership qualities in academia that promoted higher staff engagement. Notwithstanding the contributions of Asmamaw and Semela (2023), the results of the analysis came from a single public higher education institution; as such, the conclusions should be generalised with caution.

The goal of the study by Malik, Mubashir, Naqvi, Kazmi, and Gillani (2023) was to examine the complex relationships that exist between work engagement and leaders' emotional intelligence within Karachi, Pakistan's banking sector. The results indicated a significant direct and indirect

positive association between work engagement and leader emotional intelligence. Owing to Malik *et al.*'s (2023) focus on the banking industry in Karachi, additional research might be necessary to validate the results across a wider range of businesses and geographical settings.

## **Methodology**

The methodology section outlines the research design, study context, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and instrument validation adopted to investigate how emotional intelligence and team-building competencies in middle-level leaders influence employee engagement in selected private secondary schools in Lagos, Nigeria.

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from respondents at a single point in time to address the research questions. This design is appropriate for examining relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment and allows for efficient data gathering within the study's time frame.

### ***Study Setting***

The research was conducted in Eti-Osa Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. This urban district includes areas such as Victoria Island, Ikoyi, Lekki, Oniru, and Victoria Garden City. The locale was chosen for its high concentration of government-approved private secondary schools, many of which have well-defined middle-level leadership structures. Such a setting aligns with the study's focus on middle-level leadership and provides a relevant context for examining employee engagement (Bryant, Wong & Adames, 2020).

### ***Population, Sampling Strategy and Procedure***

The target population comprised all 29 government-approved private secondary schools in Eti-Osa LGA (Lagos State Ministry of Education, 2020). Focusing on this defined population helps ensure the research is practically relevant and thorough. Within these schools, the study concerned the teaching and non-teaching staff who work under middle-level leaders.

From the 29 schools, 18 (about 62%) were selected for inclusion. These schools were located in urban parts of Eti-Osa (e.g., Victoria Island, Ikoyi, Lekki) and met criteria such as having substantial enrollment and structured middle leadership hierarchies. The selection was influenced by the researchers' access to the schools and the expectation that staff there regularly interact with middle-level leaders, making them well acquainted with leadership and engagement issues (Anyim & Ekwoaba, 2021). According to 2024 administrative records, the 18 schools collectively employed 840 staff (approximately 42% male and 58% female), forming the sampling frame. Only staff below middle-management positions with at least one year of tenure in their school were eligible to participate, ensuring respondents had sufficient experience with the institution's leadership structure.

To determine the sample size for the survey, Yamane's (1967) formula for a finite population was applied. Given a population of  $N = 840$  and a 5% margin of error, the minimum recommended sample was 271 respondents. However, to enhance representativeness and account for potential non-response, the researchers targeted a larger sample. Following Lakens' (2022) recommendation to multiply the minimum sample by about 2.25 for greater accuracy, a target of  $n \approx 610$  respondents was set. This sample was then allocated proportionally across the 18 schools using Bowley's (1926) stratified allocation formula, so that each school's share of the sample reflected its share of the population. This stratification also ensured diversity in terms of school characteristics (such as size, curriculum, and student mix) was represented in the sample.

Data were collected through on-site distribution of questionnaires using a systematic sampling approach. At each school, the researchers approached staff members in their offices and invited every  $n$ th employee (e.g. every 3rd person encountered) to participate, with a random starting point to ensure fairness. Questionnaires were filled out anonymously and were retrieved immediately upon completion, yielding a high response rate.

### ***Instrumentation***

Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert-scale items. The instrument was designed to capture the study's key constructs: emotional intelligence of middle-level leaders, team-building competency of middle-level leaders, and employee engagement of staff. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was built by adapting established scales from prior research (Hebles, Yániz-Álvarez-de-Eulate and Alonso-Dos-Santos, 2022; MacCann, Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2014; Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova 2006). Existing scales, though validated in prior studies were designed for different cultural and organisational settings, so some items may not fully reflect the realities of Lagos' private secondary schools. Adapting them helps this study ensure the constructs are understood in ways that make sense within the focal specific educational and socio-cultural context. Specifically, emotional intelligence was measured with a 10-item Brief Emotional Intelligence Scale [BEIS-10] (MacCann *et al.*, 2014), team-building competency was assessed with a 9-item teamwork competency scale (Hebles *et al.*, 2022), and employee engagement was measured using a 9-item work engagement scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). All items were slightly modified to fit the school context while preserving their original meaning. A structured, standardised questionnaire format was chosen because it facilitates the collection of comparable data from a large number of respondents.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

All measurement scales had documented evidence of validity and reliability in previous studies. For example, the employee engagement scale exhibits a robust three-factor structure (reflecting vigor, dedication, and absorption) with strong inter-correlations between the factors ( $r \approx 0.80$ – $0.90$  in validation studies), indicating high construct validity. The team-building competency scale demonstrated excellent construct validity as well, with confirmatory factor analysis showing a good model fit (e.g., GFI  $\sim 0.99$ ) and the items explaining about 73% of the variance in teamwork competency. The emotional intelligence scale was content-validated by a panel of experts and supported by a confirmatory five-factor solution, confirming that it measured the intended dimensions of emotional intelligence (Davies *et al.*, 2010). In the present study's design, these existing validated instruments help ensure that each construct is being accurately captured.

Reliability of the instruments is supported by high internal consistency reported in the literature. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) for the scales ranged from 0.81 to 0.93, exceeding the conventional acceptability threshold of 0.70 (Pallant, 2001). In particular, the emotional intelligence scale had an  $\alpha$  of approximately 0.81 (Davies, Lane, Devonport, & Scott, 2010), the team-building scale around 0.93 (Hebles, Yániz-Álvarez-de-Eulate & Alonso-Dos-Santos, 2022), and the engagement scale between 0.85 and 0.92 in cross-national studies (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). These figures underscore that the questionnaire items consistently reflect their underlying constructs, lending confidence to the reliability of the data collected.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study obtained ethical approval from the University of Lagos and the management of each participating school before data collection. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and that data would be used strictly for research purposes, with the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage.

### ***Method of Data Analysis***

Data were analysed using SPSS version 28, with descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) employed to summarise respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, while inferential analysis, including mediation testing via Andrew Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022), was used to examine the hypothesised relationships, particularly the mediating role of team-building competency in the link between emotional intelligence and employee engagement. Hayes' (2022) PROCESS macro analysis was considered by the researchers as the most appropriate method of data analysis because the researchers aimed to understand whether team-building competency in private secondary middle-level leaders mattered in how their emotional intelligence competency impact employee engagement among their subordinates.

## **Results**

This section presents the results of the study, beginning with an overview of the survey response and respondent characteristics, followed by the hypothesis testing outcomes and a discussion of the findings.

### ***Demographic Profile of the Sample***

Out of 660 distributed questionnaires, 590 were completed and returned, yielding an effective response rate of about 89%. The sample was predominantly female (65.6%), with a majority of respondents aged 21–30 years (54.3%). Most participants were junior staff (63.2%), and about 60.5% held a Bachelor's degree or equivalent (see Table 1). This broad distribution of respondents provided a suitable basis for examining the role of middle-level leadership competencies in employee engagement across the 18 selected private secondary schools.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Profile (N = 590)

Variable	Category	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	392	65.6

	Male	198	34.4
<b>Age</b>	21–30 years	267	54.3
	31–40 years	218	36.9
	41+ years	105	8.8
	<b>Qualification</b>	Bachelor’s Degree /	354
	HND		
<b>Job Level</b>	Master’s Degree	236	39.5
	Junior level	369	63.2
	Middle level	95	16.1
	Senior level	126	20.7
<b>Experience</b>	1–5 years	428	72.5
	6–10 years	138	23.4
	11–15 years	22	3.7
	16+ years	2	0.4

*Source: compiled by the researchers (2025)*

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise participants’ responses on the key study constructs, Emotional Intelligence (EI), Team-Building Competency (TBC), and Employee Engagement (EE). As shown in Table 2, respondents reported moderate to high levels of each construct. The mean score for EI was  $M = 4.12$  ( $SD = 0.58$ ), indicating that middle-level leaders were generally perceived as emotionally aware and responsive. TBC had a mean of  $M = 3.95$  ( $SD = 0.62$ ), suggesting leaders were effective in fostering team cohesion and collaboration. EE scored slightly higher, with a mean of  $M = 4.21$  ( $SD = 0.54$ ), reflecting overall positive engagement among staff in the surveyed schools. These results indicate that, on average, middle-level leaders demonstrated competencies that are likely to support and enhance employee engagement. The relatively low standard deviations suggest that perceptions were fairly consistent across respondents, strengthening confidence in the reliability of these measures for further analysis.

Inferential analyses were conducted using Hayes’ PROCESS macro (Model 4) to test the study’s hypotheses. Table 3 summarises the key findings from the mediation analysis examining the effects of middle-level leaders’ emotional intelligence competency (EIC) and team-building competency (TBC) on employee engagement (EEC).

As shown in Table 3, all hypothesised effects were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). Middle-level leaders’ emotional intelligence had a significant positive effect on employee engagement ( $B = 0.3230$ ,  $t = 9.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Team-building competency also showed a strong positive effect on engagement ( $B = 0.3770$ ,  $t = 7.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Together, emotional intelligence and team-building explained about 12.4% of the variance in employee engagement ( $R = 0.352$ ,  $R^2 = 0.124$ ).

The analysis further indicated that emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of team-building competency ( $B = 0.3463$ ,  $t = 12.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), accounting for roughly 20.8% of the variance in TBC. Importantly, the indirect effect of emotional intelligence on engagement via team-building was positive and statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.1305, 95% CI [0.0825, 0.1824]), confirming that TBC mediates the influence of EIC on EEC. The total effect of emotional intelligence on engagement (combining direct and mediated paths) was also significant

( $B = 0.3230$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a corresponding effect size ( $r \approx 0.32$ ) indicating a moderate positive relationship.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs (N = 590)

Construct	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	4.12	0.58	2.50	5.00
Team-Building Competency (TBC)	3.95	0.62	2.00	5.00
Employee Engagement (EE)	4.21	0.54	2.75	5.00

*Note:* Ratings were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

*Source:* computed by the researchers (2025)

Table 3: Summary of PROCESS Macro Analysis for Mediation Model Testing

Model / Path	Predictor	Coefficient (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F(df)	MSE
<b>Mediation (Path a)</b> Outcome: TBC	Constant	8.1158	0.4250	19.10	.000	[7.2810, 8.9505]	.456	.208	F(1, 580) = 151.87	2.04
	EIC → TBC	0.3463	0.0281	12.32	.000	[0.2911, 0.4014]				
<b>Mediation (Path b &amp; c')</b> Outcome: EEC	Constant	7.0626	0.6581	10.73	.000	[5.7701, 8.3551]	.449	.201	F(2, 579) = 72.89	3.00
	EIC → EEC (Direct effect, c')	0.1925	0.0383	5.03	.000	[0.1172, 0.2677]				
	TBC → EEC (Path b)	0.3770	0.0504	7.48	.000	[0.2781, 0.4760]				
<b>Total Effect (Path c)</b>	Constant	10.1223	0.5396	18.76	.000	[9.0626, 11.1820]	.352	.124	F(1, 580) = 82.00	3.29

Model / Path	Predictor	Coefficient (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F(df)	MSE
Outcome: EEC										
	EIC → EEC	0.3230	0.0357	9.06	.000	[0.2529, 0.3930]				
<b>Indirect Effect</b>	EIC → TBC → EEC	0.1305	0.0259	—	—	[0.0825, 0.1824]*				

Note. EIC = Emotional Intelligence Competency; TBC = Team-Building Competency; EEC = Employee Engagement. Bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 samples) are reported for the indirect effect. \*Significant at 95% CI.

### Discussion of Findings

The results provide clear support for all four hypothesized relationships, underscoring the crucial role of middle-level leaders’ competencies in fostering employee engagement. First, the study found a significant positive relationship between middle-level leaders’ emotional intelligence competency and employee engagement in the surveyed schools. This finding aligns with existing evidence that leaders with higher emotional intelligence are more adept at engaging their subordinates through empathetic, caring, and emotionally supportive behaviors (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2020; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Malik *et al.*, 2023). Emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to understand their team members’ needs and emotions, which helps in creating a work atmosphere where employees feel valued and motivated.

Second, there was a significant positive correlation between team-building competency in middle-level leaders and employee engagement. In other words, leaders who excel at team-building tend to inspire more cohesive and motivated teams, which in turn exhibit higher engagement levels. This outcome is consistent with prior studies emphasising that strong team-building skills enable leaders to foster unity, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose among staff, thereby enhancing employees’ enthusiasm and commitment to their work (Ginting *et al.*, 2020; Mughal, 2020; Raymond, 2023). When middle-level leaders actively build and nurture their teams, through trust-building, effective communication, and conflict resolution, they create an environment where employees are more invested in their roles and in the school’s goals.

Third, the mediation analysis revealed that team-building competency plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotional intelligence and employee engagement. In practical terms, this means that one way emotionally intelligent middle-level leaders improve engagement is by leveraging their team-building abilities. This finding corroborates earlier suggestions in the literature that emotional intelligence equips leaders to effectively understand and manage their own and others’ emotions (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2020; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Malik *et al.*, 2023). By channeling these emotional insights into constructive team-building strategies, such leaders can cultivate a more engaged workforce. In line with this mechanism, our results indicate that emotionally intelligent leaders who also demonstrate strong team-building skills are particularly successful in translating their emotional awareness into higher employee engagement (Ginting *et*

al., 2020; Mughal, 2020; Raymond, 2023). The significant indirect effect (EIC → TBC → EEC) confirms that team-building competency is a key conduit through which emotional intelligence impacts engagement.

Finally, employee engagement levels were found to differ significantly based on the levels of emotional intelligence and team-building competencies of middle-level leaders. Subordinates reported notably higher engagement when their immediate leaders scored high on both emotional intelligence and team-building skills. This outcome highlights the combined importance of these two competencies in shaping the work environment. It is in tune with observations from prior research that emotionally intelligent leaders create positive and supportive work climates by adeptly managing workplace emotions and conflict (Alotaibi *et al.*, 2020; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). Likewise, leaders with strong team-building competency establish cohesive, collaborative cultures with a shared sense of purpose, which collectively foster greater employee engagement (Ginting *et al.*, 2020; Mughal, 2020; Raymond, 2023). In summary, the findings reinforce that middle-level leaders who possess both high emotional intelligence and effective team-building skills can significantly elevate their employees' engagement levels by creating an environment of support, trust, and motivation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that both emotional intelligence and team-building competencies in middle-level leaders are critical drivers of employee engagement in Nigeria's private secondary schools. All the research hypotheses were supported, indicating that these leadership competencies not only have direct positive effects on staff engagement but also interact with each other (via mediation) to amplify this effect. In particular, team-building skills augment the impact of emotional intelligence on engagement, suggesting that emotionally intelligent leaders reach their full potential for inspiring engagement when they are also adept at building strong teams.

Given these findings, it becomes imperative for private secondary school management to strategically recruit, select, and develop middle-level leaders who exhibit high emotional intelligence along with robust team-building abilities. This emphasis will help ensure a more engaged and committed school workforce. Our results further underscore the pivotal role of middle-level leadership in shaping a positive organizational climate that boosts employee morale and performance. By focusing on these often overlooked leadership roles, this research contributes to the body of knowledge on educational leadership, highlighting that middle-level leaders, not just principals, have a substantial impact on important outcomes like employee engagement in schools.

## *Theoretical and Practical Implications*

The findings strengthen our understanding of Organisational Support Theory (OST) by showing that middle-level leaders' competencies are central to how employees perceive support. Emotional intelligence emerges as a core capability that enables leaders to understand staff needs, respond constructively, and create a climate of genuine care, signals that shape perceived organisational support. The results also show that emotional intelligence becomes most influential when channelled into team-focused behaviours. This positions team-building not just

as a skill, but as a key mechanism through which emotionally intelligent leadership translates into an engaging and supportive work environment.

By confirming team-building as a mediator, the study adds nuance to OST. Supportive leadership involves more than empathy; it also requires structures that promote cohesion, clarity, collaboration, and healthy conflict management. This pathway broadens OST's relevance in school settings by illustrating that engagement rises when emotional awareness is reinforced by strong team dynamics. Ultimately, the model highlights that perceived support depends not only on leaders' intentions but on the collective environment they build.

Practically, the findings call for a renewed focus on leadership development in private secondary schools. Emotional intelligence and team-building are not peripheral skills; they are essential for cultivating an engaged workforce. Schools can strengthen staff morale and retention by training middle-level leaders to read emotional cues, respond with empathy, manage conflict, and model collaborative behaviour. These competencies help create supportive daily interactions that boost staff motivation.

The results also underline the importance of deliberate team-building efforts. Equipping leaders to foster cohesion, clarify roles, encourage shared decision-making, and navigate interpersonal tensions can significantly lift engagement. Because team-building transmits the effects of emotional intelligence, leadership programmes that combine both will likely deliver the strongest improvements. This requires shifting development efforts from individual skills alone to team-based practices, such as joint planning, shared goals, and structured team reflection.

In addition, the findings remind school owners and administrators that middle-level leaders play a pivotal role in how teachers experience organisational support. Their everyday behaviours shape how valued teachers feel and how willing they are to invest in their work. Strengthening these competencies is therefore a strategic investment in school performance, stability, and long-term staff development.

### ***Recommendations***

Building on the evidence from this study, several practical steps are recommended to enhance employee engagement through improved middle-level leadership:

- i. Private secondary schools should invest in comprehensive training programmes to develop emotional intelligence and team-building competencies among their middle-level leaders. Such capacity-building programmes should include modules and practical exercises on core skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, trust-building, effective communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork, which are fundamental to both emotional intelligence and team-building.
- ii. School principals and administrators should institute periodic performance evaluations to assess middle-level leaders' proficiency in emotional intelligence and team-building. These evaluations will help identify specific areas where individual leaders may need further development. By obtaining feedback on

- competencies like empathy, communication, or conflict management, schools can tailor follow-up training or coaching to address those needs and continuously strengthen their leaders' capabilities.
- iii. Mentoring and coaching initiatives can be used to cultivate emotional intelligence and team-building skills in emerging middle-level leaders. For example, pairing less experienced middle leaders with seasoned mentors or coaches can provide hands-on guidance and role modeling in areas such as team leadership, interpersonal skills, and handling emotional dynamics in the workplace. Over time, this experiential learning approach will help newer middle-level leaders gain practical insights and confidence in applying emotional intelligence and team-building techniques to engage their teams.
  - iv. School leaders should strive to create a work environment that naturally reinforces and benefits from high emotional intelligence and strong team cohesion. This includes encouraging open communication, collaboration, and mutual support among staff, as well as promoting values like respect, inclusion, and shared purpose. By embedding these principles into the school's culture (for instance, through team-building activities, staff retreats, or recognition of collaborative behavior), private secondary schools can amplify the engagement benefits of having emotionally intelligent and team-oriented middle-level leaders.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Like any study, this research has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the scope was limited to government-approved private secondary schools within a specific locality of Lagos State, which may affect the generalisability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts. The demographic concentration of the sample (e.g., mostly young, junior staff in an urban area) means the results might not directly translate to different populations or non-educational sectors. Second, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, introducing the possibility of common-method bias and socially desirable responses. Although precautions were taken, the reliance on participants' self-assessment of engagement and leadership behaviours could influence the accuracy of the results.

Future research can build on these findings by addressing the noted limitations. Studies could expand the sample to other states or countries, or compare public and private school settings, to verify whether the observed relationships hold in different contexts. Additionally, employing qualitative methods (such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, or case studies) would provide a richer understanding of how and why team-building competency in middle-level leaders moderates or facilitates the effect of emotional intelligence on employee engagement. Such approaches could capture nuanced interactions and contextual factors that surveys alone might miss, thereby offering deeper insights and potentially guiding more targeted interventions to improve engagement in educational institutions.

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#### Competing Interests

There is no conflict of interest in this publication.

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