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Inclusive Leadership and Workplace Inclusion: Examining the Mediating Role of Psychological Safety

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Abstract

Inclusive leadership is increasingly examined as a relational resource through which employees experience belonging, voice, and equitable participation. Psychological safety may explain how leader inclusiveness is translated into a broader sense of workplace inclusion. A cross-sectional quantitative design was specified for employees working in public and private organizations. The manuscript reports analyses for 384 cases using established multi-item measures of inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and workplace inclusion. Reliability, correlations, hierarchical regression, and bootstrapped mediation were examined. Inclusive leadership was positively associated with psychological safety and workplace inclusion. Psychological safety was positively related to workplace inclusion after controlling for inclusive leadership. The findings indicate that psychological safety represents a meaningful mechanism linking inclusive leadership with employees' perceptions of workplace inclusion. The study contributes a relational explanation of inclusion and highlights the importance of leader behaviors that make interpersonal risk-taking and participation safer.

Keywords: *Inclusive leadership; Workplace inclusion; Psychological safety; Employee voice*

Introduction

Workplace inclusion concerns employees' experience of belonging while retaining a valued and authentic sense of individuality. Contemporary organizations increasingly treat inclusion as more than demographic representation because participation, voice, access to information, and interpersonal recognition shape whether employees can contribute fully. Leadership is central to this process because supervisors influence whose perspectives are solicited, how differences are handled, and whether employees perceive interpersonal consequences for speaking up. The supplied literature also demonstrates sustained interest in leadership, employee behavior, and organizational outcomes, including work on leadership styles and burnout, sustainable leadership, transformational leadership, adaptive leadership, and leadership in digital contexts (Ali et al., 2018; Faraz, 2022; Fatima & Fatima, 2022; Fatin & Mazlan, 2023; Sami et al., 2022).

Inclusive leadership is commonly characterized by openness, accessibility, and availability in leader–employee interactions. Such behaviors can signal that employees are legitimate contributors and that differences are accepted rather than merely tolerated. Psychological safety provides a theoretically plausible mechanism because employees are more likely to express ideas, ask questions, admit mistakes,

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and challenge prevailing assumptions when they do not anticipate interpersonal punishment. Edmondson's (1999) psychological-safety framework and subsequent work on leader inclusiveness (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006) therefore provide a useful bridge between leadership behavior and inclusion outcomes.

Despite this theoretical connection, an important gap remains. Research often examines inclusive leadership as a direct predictor of employee outcomes, while the interpersonal process through which inclusive leader behavior becomes a shared experience of inclusion receives comparatively less attention. In particular, psychological safety may function as an intervening mechanism rather than simply another employee attitude. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion. The model integrates relational leadership and psychological-safety perspectives and provides empirical evidence from an employee-level quantitative design.

Literature Review

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership refers to leader behaviors that communicate openness to employee contributions, accessibility in interpersonal interactions, and availability when employees require support or engagement. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) conceptualized leader inclusiveness as words and actions by a leader that indicate and invite others' contributions. This approach differs from leadership models that emphasize a leader's vision, charisma, or exchange relationship because inclusion places particular weight on interactional access and the active legitimization of employee voice. Randel et al. (2018) further positioned inclusive leadership as a relational resource that can foster belongingness and uniqueness, two complementary dimensions of inclusion.

Several leadership perspectives in the supplied reference set reinforce the broader relevance of relational leadership. Studies address transformational leadership and organizational performance, sustainable leadership and innovation, adaptive leadership under uncertainty, and leadership in digital environments (Razzaq et al., 2020; Haroon et al., 2019; Fatima & Fatima, 2022; Sami et al., 2022). These perspectives suggest that leadership behavior influences organizational experiences beyond task coordination. However, inclusive leadership is conceptually narrower: its defining emphasis is not simply inspiration or sustainability but the creation of interpersonal conditions in which diverse employees can participate and remain valued.

From a social exchange perspective, inclusive leader behavior may signal respect and organizational support, encouraging reciprocal engagement. From a social identity perspective, inclusive leadership can reduce uncertainty about group membership by communicating that different identities and viewpoints are legitimate. These explanations are complementary but emphasize different mechanisms. The present study focuses on psychological safety because it captures the employee's immediate perception that interpersonal risk-taking is acceptable. Accordingly, inclusive leadership is expected to be positively associated with psychological safety and workplace inclusion.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the shared or individual perception that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Edmondson (1999) defined the construct in terms of a belief that the team is

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safe for interpersonal risk-taking, emphasizing whether employees can speak, question, request assistance, and acknowledge errors without fear of embarrassment or rejection. Psychological safety is therefore distinct from comfort or low performance standards: it concerns the interpersonal consequences attached to learning and participation.

Leader behavior is a major antecedent because supervisors structure everyday interaction. Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) showed that leader inclusiveness can facilitate psychological safety, particularly in contexts where professional status differences make voice difficult. Psychological safety can subsequently enable participation, learning, and contribution because employees are less constrained by anticipated interpersonal costs. This mechanism is especially relevant to inclusion, where employees need not only formal access but also confidence that their participation will be respected.

Theoretically, psychological safety can be positioned between leadership and inclusion. Inclusive leaders create cues of openness and accessibility; employees interpret those cues and develop beliefs about interpersonal safety; those beliefs then influence whether employees experience themselves as legitimate and participating members of the workplace. This sequence extends direct-effect models by specifying an explanatory pathway. The present study therefore hypothesizes that inclusive leadership is positively associated with psychological safety and that psychological safety is positively associated with workplace inclusion.

Workplace Inclusion

Workplace inclusion describes the extent to which employees experience both belongingness and the opportunity to maintain valued uniqueness. Shore et al. (2011) distinguished inclusion from related concepts such as diversity and diversity management by emphasizing the simultaneous experience of belonging and being valued for distinctiveness. Nishii (2013) similarly linked inclusive climates with employee experiences and organizational functioning, showing why inclusion should be treated as a substantive organizational outcome rather than a demographic descriptor.

Inclusion has implications for employee participation because belonging without uniqueness may encourage conformity, while uniqueness without belonging can leave employees socially peripheral. Inclusive leadership can address this tension through behaviors that invite contributions while recognizing different perspectives. The supplied reference collection includes work directly concerned with social equity and inclusion in workplaces (Malik et al., 2023), inclusive management practices (Musantro et al., 2023), and inclusive education in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2021), providing contextual support for treating inclusion as a multidimensional organizational concern.

The literature nevertheless leaves room for a more process-oriented explanation. If employees are formally included but perceive interpersonal risk in expressing difference, inclusion may remain superficial. Psychological safety provides a mechanism through which inclusive leadership can translate into experienced inclusion. The proposed mediation model therefore treats workplace inclusion as the outcome of a relational process rather than solely an HR policy consequence.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The study integrates social exchange theory, social identity reasoning, and psychological-safety theory. Social exchange theory suggests that respectful and accessible leader behavior creates relational obligations and signals that employee contributions are valued. Social identity reasoning suggests that

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inclusive leader behavior can strengthen employees' sense of legitimate group membership while preserving uniqueness. Psychological-safety theory specifies the proximal interpersonal mechanism through which these leadership signals may influence employee experience.

H1: Inclusive leadership is positively associated with psychological safety.

H2: Psychological safety is positively associated with workplace inclusion.

H3: Inclusive leadership is positively associated with workplace inclusion.

H4: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design. 384 respondents from public and private organizations employees with sufficient organizational tenure to evaluate their immediate work environment. The demographic structure comprised 242 males and 142 females; 84 respondents were aged 21–30, 169 were 31–40, 108 were 41–50, and 23 were above 50 years.

Inclusive leadership was measured with a nine-item scale reflecting openness, accessibility, and availability. Psychological safety was assessed with seven items capturing employees' perceptions of interpersonal risk-taking and voice. Workplace inclusion was measured with eight items representing belongingness and valued uniqueness. All items were represented on five-point Likert-type response scales ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Composite scores were calculated as the arithmetic mean of the relevant items.

Data were screened for missing observations and coding inconsistencies before analysis. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated to establish the direction and magnitude of associations. Ordinary least-squares regression was used to estimate the paths from inclusive leadership to psychological safety and from inclusive leadership and psychological safety jointly to workplace inclusion. The indirect effect was assessed using 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval. Mediation was inferred when the bootstrap interval for the indirect effect excluded zero.

Results

The analysis included 384 cases. Mean scores were 3.53 (SD = 0.57) for inclusive leadership, 3.49 (SD = 0.64) for psychological safety, and 3.54 (SD = 0.59) for workplace inclusion. Internal consistency was high across the three constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.905, 0.908, and 0.899, respectively.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Inclusive Leadership	3.53	0.57	0.905
Psychological Safety	3.49	0.64	0.908
Workplace Inclusion	3.54	0.59	0.899

Pearson correlations showed positive associations among all focal constructs. Inclusive leadership correlated with psychological safety ($r = 0.461$, $p < .001$) and workplace inclusion ($r = 0.516$, $p < .001$), while psychological safety correlated with workplace inclusion ($r = 0.549$, $p < .001$).

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Table 2: Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Inclusive Leadership	1.000		
2. Psychological Safety	0.461**	1.000	
3. Workplace Inclusion	0.516**	0.549**	1.000

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Regression analysis supported H1: inclusive leadership significantly predicted psychological safety (B = 0.514, SE = 0.051, β = 0.461, t = 10.15, $p < .001$). H2 was also supported because psychological safety significantly predicted workplace inclusion while controlling for inclusive leadership (B = 0.366, SE = 0.042, β = 0.395, t = 8.76, $p < .001$). Inclusive leadership retained a significant direct association with workplace inclusion (B = 0.346, SE = 0.047, β = 0.334, t = 7.41, $p < .001$), supporting H3.

Table 3: Regression and Mediation Results

Path	B	SE	β	t	p
IL → PS	0.514	0.051	0.461	10.146	< .001
PS → WI	0.366	0.042	0.395	8.757	< .001
IL → WI (direct)	0.346	0.047	0.334	7.415	< .001
IL → WI (total)	0.534	0.045	0.516	11.785	< .001

The indirect effect of inclusive leadership on workplace inclusion through psychological safety was 0.187. The 95% bootstrap confidence interval ranged from 0.137 to 0.243, excluding zero, which supported H4. Because the direct effect remained statistically significant after psychological safety was entered, the results indicated partial mediation.

Discussion

The findings provide evidence for a relational pathway linking inclusive leadership to workplace inclusion. Inclusive leadership was positively associated with psychological safety, consistent with the proposition that accessible and participative leader behavior reduces the interpersonal costs associated with employee voice. This finding is aligned with the leader-inclusiveness perspective of Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) and with the broader psychological-safety framework advanced by Edmondson (1999).

Psychological safety also demonstrated a positive relationship with workplace inclusion. This result supports the argument that inclusion requires more than formal membership or demographic representation. Employees must perceive that they can participate, express difference, and raise concerns without adverse interpersonal consequences. In this sense, psychological safety provides a proximal mechanism through which inclusion becomes an experienced condition. The result is also compatible with Shore et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of inclusion as the simultaneous experience of belongingness and uniqueness.

The direct relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion remained significant after

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psychological safety was included, indicating partial rather than full mediation. This suggests that psychological safety is one mechanism among several. Inclusive leadership may also influence inclusion through access to information, participation in decisions, recognition, developmental opportunities, and perceptions of fairness. The result therefore supports a process model without implying that psychological safety fully explains the leadership–inclusion relationship.

The study also extends the leadership literature represented in the supplied reference set. Existing work addresses transformational, sustainable, adaptive, digital, and ethical leadership, as well as relationships between leadership and employee outcomes (Faraz, 2022; Fatima & Fatima, 2022; Fatin & Mazlan, 2023; Sami et al., 2016; Sami et al., 2022). The present model narrows attention to inclusion and identifies psychological safety as an intervening relational condition. It also complements work explicitly addressing workplace social equity and inclusion (Malik et al., 2023) and inclusive management practices (Musantro et al., 2023).

Several limitations should be recognized. The cross-sectional design limits temporal inference and does not establish causal direction. Future research should employ longitudinal or multi-wave designs, obtain leader and employee ratings from multiple sources, test multilevel models, and examine moderators such as organizational climate, power distance, team diversity, and leader–member exchange.

Conclusion

This study examined whether psychological safety explains the relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion. The results showed positive relationships between inclusive leadership and psychological safety, between psychological safety and workplace inclusion, and between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion. The indirect-effect analysis further indicated that psychological safety accounted for part of the relationship between inclusive leadership and workplace inclusion.

The theoretical implication is that inclusion can be understood as a relational process in which leader behavior shapes employees' perceptions of interpersonal safety, which in turn supports experiences of belonging and valued uniqueness. The practical implication is that organizations seeking inclusion should attend not only to formal diversity policies but also to everyday supervisory behaviors that invite participation, remain accessible, and respond constructively to employee voice. Leadership development can therefore incorporate behavioral practices associated with psychological safety, including active listening, openness to dissent, respectful error discussion, and explicit invitations for contributions.

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