



Fostering innovation and well-being through inclusion: Inclusive Leadership, a review of the effect on the employee innovative work behavior and well-being

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesizes data from 50 research articles, review papers, case studies, and manuscripts published between 2016-2024 to clarify the relationship between inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior (IWB), and employee well-being in organizations. The PRISMA flow diagram explains the steps taken to select studies for the review associated with IL for innovation and multidimensional well-being. The findings show patterns and themes pertaining to organizational relevance and the positive association of Inclusive Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior with Employee Well-Being dimensions. They revealed areas of research deficits that are not adequately covered in the current literature. This systematic review contributes to the existing knowledge on Inclusive Leadership, both theoretically and practically, for managers. The study highlights leadership implications in encouraging innovation and producing positive effects on Employee Well-Being across organizational sectors investigated.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, workplace well-being, psychological well-being, subjective well-being, diversity

Introduction

Over the years, the concept of inclusive leadership has attracted much interest in the field of organizational behavior research, mainly because of its massive influence on many aspects of the employee profile, especially innovation and well-being (Shore & Chung, 2021) ^[47]. Currently, as organizations seek to become more diverse, understanding the leadership process and how it influences construct diversity has become an important topic of study. Promoting justice, diversity, and encouraging interaction with all workers have been associated with positive organizational results. These include constructive changes in innovative work behavior (IWB) and positive changes in stakeholders' employee well-being (Ackaradejruangsri *et al.*, 2022) ^[1]. The relationship between these two areas of interest, innovation and well-being, is a major concern in modern leadership research, as organizations strive to sustain their competitive advantage and protect the psychological and emotional state of employees (Hannah *et al.*, 2020) ^[26]. Therefore, inclusive leadership is the process of ensuring that all employees feel welcome and have equal opportunities to contribute in the workplace due to their diverse characteristics (Bhatnagar & Aggarwal, 2022) ^[10]. It entails promoting the concepts of inclusion and psychological safety within organizations, which are crucial to supporting innovative work. Workplace research has established that employee inclusiveness facilitates organizational innovation behavior in leaders. Such behaviors may include idea generation, identification of creative solutions, and cross-boundary thinking. In the same vein, it is perceived that enhanced efforts for workplace inclusiveness have a positive effect on the well-being of the employees in the organizations, while at the same time, it helps to trim stress aspects and contribute to favorable climates that in turn improve employees' pro-employee job satisfaction and heart health; thus, overall organizational durability and stability could be highly leveraged (Chen *et al.*, 2020) ^[12, 13].

To write this review, the author combined 50 academic articles that addressed the connection between inclusive leadership behaviors and their influence on IWBs and employee psychosocial health. This review gathered qualitative, quantitative, and experimental studies to provide the idea that the literature was rich in methodologies regarding the effect of inclusive leadership. In so doing, this paper aims to review the studies contained in the paper to establish the main trends in the literature, theories, and models employed in understanding inclusive leadership and how specific practices of inclusive leadership support positive employee outcomes.

A majority of the studies discussed in this article also support the idea that inclusive leadership fosters innovation and well-being (Li & Tang, 2022; Bhatnagar & Aggarwal, 2022) ^[10]. However, there is scope for future studies; indeed, most past work has centered on the outcomes of inclusive leadership on a specific employee, but little is known about the contextual and organizational factors that can act as moderators or mediators of these results. For example, does this organizational culture or the nature of the work environment shape or color how inclusive leadership achieves its intended goals of changing employee behavior and improving employee well-being? In addition, a significant amount of confusion exists regarding which leadership behaviors are most helpful in promoting positive innovation and well-being within organizations. The second gap highlighted in the literature is that, to date, relatively little research has been conducted on cross-cultural variations in the practice of inclusive leadership. Despite the notable growth in the amount of research, there is still a huge need to establish how leadership practices are likely to be understood in non-Western cultural communities. The introduction of globalization into today's organizations also calls for more specificity on exactly how the concept of inclusive leadership can work and on its effects on several groups of employees around the globe.

Therefore, this review seeks to offer a synthesis of the literature on inclusive leadership, IWB, and well-being to offer an overall synthesis of the accumulated findings and to join the discussion on leadership in today's organizations. Therefore, in addition to categorizing strengths and weaknesses in the existing literature, this study also offers avenues for future research and development and claims that future theorization of the inclusive leadership and employee outcomes relationship should consider the processes, contexts, and culture in which inclusive leadership is practiced. Finally, this review aims to offer useful information to scholars and practitioners who are willing to be inspired and apply the inclusive leadership model to realize organizational innovation and promote employees' happiness at work.

Literature Review

Inclusive Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

Several reviewed studies show that IL positively affects IWB. Inclusive leaders create a landscape in which employees think of new ideas, share ideas with others, and implement new and innovative solutions (Wu & Li, 2023) [52]. Research by Javed *et al.* (2019) [28] revealed that such activities as acts of inclusive leadership, such as active listening, valuing of diverse opinions, and autonomy,

directly strengthen IWB in teams. Psychological safety is an important antecedent to innovation (Kim *et al.*, 2020) [31], and inclusive leadership occurs. One thing that runs across the studies is that inclusive leaders can cultivate a safe place in which employees believe their ideas are valued, and failure is an opportunity to learn rather than something that will put their career in jeopardy (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) [17].

A third key finding across the studies is that inclusive leadership encourages employees to engage in innovative behavior by allowing them to engage in risk-taking and experimentation with new approaches (Zhang & Bartol, 2010) [56]. Indeed, if leaders empower employees, then employees are more likely to put forward and tinker with new ideas (Gupta *et al.*, 2022) [24] because empowered employees feel greater control of their work, which has a positive relationship with IWB and intrinsic motivation. Employees who felt empowered by their leaders were more likely to propose novel ideas and experiment with them. Empowered employees perceive greater control over their work, which is positively associated with both IWB and intrinsic motivation. Inclusive leaders can cultivate a safe place in which employees believe their ideas are valued, and failure is an opportunity to learn rather than something that will jeopardize their career (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) [17].

Table 1: Summary of Previous Research on Inclusive Leadership and Innovative Work Behavior

Focus Area	Key Variables & Mechanisms	Context / Sample	Consolidated Findings	Representative Studies
Direct relationship between Inclusive Leadership (IL) and IWB	IL → IWB	IT, healthcare, manufacturing, education, banking (Asia, Europe)	Inclusive leadership consistently shows a positive and significant effect on employees' innovative work behavior across sectors	Akram <i>et al.</i> (2016) [3]; Javed <i>et al.</i> (2019) [28]; Wang <i>et al.</i> (2021) [51]; Khan <i>et al.</i> (2022) [30]
Psychological mediators	Psychological empowerment, psychological safety, psychological capital, creative self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, resilience	Healthcare, IT, SMEs, universities	Psychological mechanisms partially or fully mediate the IL-IWB relationship, strengthening innovation outcomes	Hafeez <i>et al.</i> (2019); Fang <i>et al.</i> (2019) [20]; Zhu <i>et al.</i> (2020) [57]; Mustafa <i>et al.</i> (2021); Bao <i>et al.</i> (2024) [8]
Work-related mediators	Work engagement, vigor, job crafting, job autonomy, knowledge sharing	Banking, manufacturing, project-based organizations	Inclusive leaders enhance engagement and autonomy, which in turn promote innovative behaviors	Qi & Liu (2019); Elsayed <i>et al.</i> (2020) [18]; Mir <i>et al.</i> (2021) [38]; Zhang & Zhao (2023) [55]
Team- and climate-level mechanisms	Team voice, innovative climate, organizational harmony, ambidexterity	Teams, NGOs, project organizations	Team psychological safety and supportive climate act as key transmission mechanisms between IL and innovation	Ye <i>et al.</i> (2019) [53]; Gong <i>et al.</i> (2021) [22]; Guo <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Moderators	Performance pressure, challenge stress, innovation rewards, environmental uncertainty	Manufacturing, technology firms	Contextual factors strengthen or weaken the IL-IWB relationship	Tao <i>et al.</i> (2022) [49]; Alessa & Durugbo (2022) [4]; Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2024) [41]
Education & creative teaching	Knowledge sharing, innovative climate	Schools, universities	IL positively influences creative teaching and innovation through knowledge sharing and climate	Saatai <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Review & conceptual evidence	Systematic and narrative reviews	Scopus-indexed literature	Prior reviews confirm IL as a central leadership approach for fostering innovation	Guo <i>et al.</i> (2023); Shakil <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Identified research gaps	Culture, longitudinal designs, multi-level models	Cross-national	Need for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and multi-level research on IL-IWB	Across studies

Inclusive leadership and Employee Well-being

The literature has shown that psychological well-being has a clear and positive relationship with inclusive leadership. The behaviors exhibited by leaders, such as showing emotional support, empathy, and recognition of the specific contributions made by each employee, all enhance the feeling of employees being valued and

supported at work (Shore & Chung, 2021) [47]. Inclusive leadership has been associated with several studies demonstrating that workers are less stressed, anxious, and burned out at work, while reporting higher levels of job satisfaction and overall well-being (Inceoglu *et al.*, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2019) [27]. Psychological well-being denotes employees' emotional resilience, self-efficacy, and

mental health (Inceoglu *et al.*, 2018) [27]. Inclusive leadership promotes a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation or exclusion, which may negatively affect mental health (Khan *et al.*, 2022) [30].

Workplace well-being was another dominant theme of the reviewed studies. Several studies, for example (Sivanathan *et al.*, 2004) [48], point out that inclusive leadership increases workplace well-being by encouraging a respectful and fair culture. Employees in inclusive workplaces display more engagement, greater social relationships with colleagues at work, and greater job meaningfulness (Le *et al.*, 2018) [33]. Inclusive leaders are

concerned about their employees' welfare by providing work-life balance, teamwork, and value towards the employees' contributions (Fairlie, 2017) [19].

Subjective well-being is described as the general satisfaction with life and emotions experienced by employees regarding the work environment. According to (Dong & Yan, 2022) [16], research studies have illustrated that inclusive leadership practices are positively associated with subjective well-being. When employees believe that their efforts are valued and appreciated by their leader, their happiness, job satisfaction, and life satisfaction are higher.

Table 2: Summary of Previous Research on Inclusive Leadership and Employee Well-Being

Focus Area	Key Mediators / Mechanisms	Context / Sample	Consolidated Findings	Representative Studies
Direct relationship between Inclusive Leadership (IL) and Employee Well-Being (EWB)	IL → EWB	Banking, telecom, healthcare, manufacturing, public organizations	Inclusive leadership demonstrates a strong positive association with employee workplace and psychological well-being across sectors	Choi <i>et al.</i> (2017) [14]; Lin (2020); Ahmad <i>et al.</i> (2021); Ashmawy (2023) [6]
Psychological and attitudinal mediators	Person–job fit, organizational trust, psychological capital, vigor, work engagement	Healthcare, banking, NGOs, knowledge-intensive industries	Psychological and attitudinal resources mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee well-being	Choi <i>et al.</i> (2017) [14]; Yuming & Zhuoxin (2022) [54, 57]; Rogozińska (2023) [44]; Liu <i>et al.</i> (2024) [36]
Crisis and stress contexts	Psychological safety, distress reduction, self-sacrifice	Hospitals, crisis and pandemic settings	Inclusive leadership reduces psychological distress and enhances employee well-being during crises	Ahmad <i>et al.</i> (2021); Umrani <i>et al.</i> (2023) [50]
Education and public sector well-being	Strategic vision, leadership guidance, inclusiveness	TVET colleges, public organizations	Inclusive leadership contributes to employee well-being through strategic clarity, though inconsistent implementation remains a challenge	Bester (2023) [9]; Ashmawy (2023) [6]
Review and conceptual evidence	Leadership behaviors, diversity, nature of work	Cross-national and multi-sector literature	Reviews highlight inclusive leadership as a critical antecedent of employee well-being and sustainable performance	Inceoglu <i>et al.</i> (2018) [27]; Jebb <i>et al.</i> (2020) [29]; Putra <i>et al.</i> (2024) [42]
Organizational outcomes linked to well-being	Productivity, job performance, firm performance	Manufacturing, multi-industry datasets	Higher employee well-being is associated with improved productivity and performance outcomes	Krekal <i>et al.</i> (2019); Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2019) [40]
Identified research gaps	Culture, longitudinal designs, moderators	Cross-cultural contexts	Prior studies call for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and multi-level research on inclusive leadership and well-being	Across studies

Mechanisms Linking Inclusive Leadership with Innovative Work Behavior and Well-Being

According to the developed evidence in Tables 1 and 2, previous research has highlighted a number of the underlying processes in which inclusive leadership affects innovative work performance and employee welfare. Of these mechanisms, one of them, which are reported most consistently, is the psychological safety. By promoting a climate in which staff members feel free to transmit thoughts, issues, and suggestions without needing to worry about the adverse impacts of such conduct, inclusive leaders contribute to innovation and improve happiness (Javed *et al.*, 2019) [28].

Moreover, the social exchange theory offers a very powerful explanatory model of the relationship between the two. Inclusive leadership fosters positive leader employee relations that are based on trust, respect and support. To it, employees then respond by returning such positive perceptions of treatment by augmenting innovative behaviors and enhancing psychological well-being (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) [15].

Moreover, a number of works note that concepts of inclusive leadership and transformational leadership overlap. Inclusive leaders are inspirational, motivational, and provide intellectual stimulation to employees who enhance their feeling of value and belonging. This atmosphere of confidence and empowerment

promotes intrinsic motivation and creativity of employees and their well-being in general (Carreiro and Oliveira, 2019) [11].

Methodology of Review

The review was based on an analysis of 50 peer-reviewed articles, manuscripts, and review papers published between 2016 and 2024. The PRISMA flow diagram is used to explain the flow of steps that have been taken in order to choose the studies to be reviewed. In total, 1,500 records were initially identified through four large databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Pub Med. out of 300 duplicate records being removed, 1,200 were retained to be used during the screening phase of the research. In this stage, the article titles and abstracts were searched, and a list of 950 articles was disregarded as not fitting the inclusion criteria. As such, 250 full-text articles have been identified and examined based on eligibility. Out of these studies, 200 studies were excluded because: 70 studies were non-peer-reviewed, 50 studies had a weak methodology, and 80 studies were not focused on inclusive leadership. The background contained information about the continuation of research progress and ended up in 50 studies that qualified for all the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. This stringent and open procedure of selection made sure that only good quality and thematically relevant literature was used

to comprehend the correlation between inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, and employee well-being. The papers most relevant to the topic have been selected, considering their relevance, to provide insight into inclusive leadership and its effects on IWB and employee well-being. All the studies included here represent a rich variety of methodologies, including qualitative case studies, quantitative surveys, experimental designs, and mixed-method approaches. The studies' geographical and organizational contexts encompass a reasonable

breadth of understanding of the topic. This study focused on three main areas:

1. How does inclusive leadership impact innovative work behavior?
2. What is the relationship between inclusive leadership and various dimensions that explain employee well-being (psychological, workplace, and subjective well-being) and the mechanisms and context factors that mediate or moderate these relationships?
3. What causes IL to change innovative work behavior (IWB)?

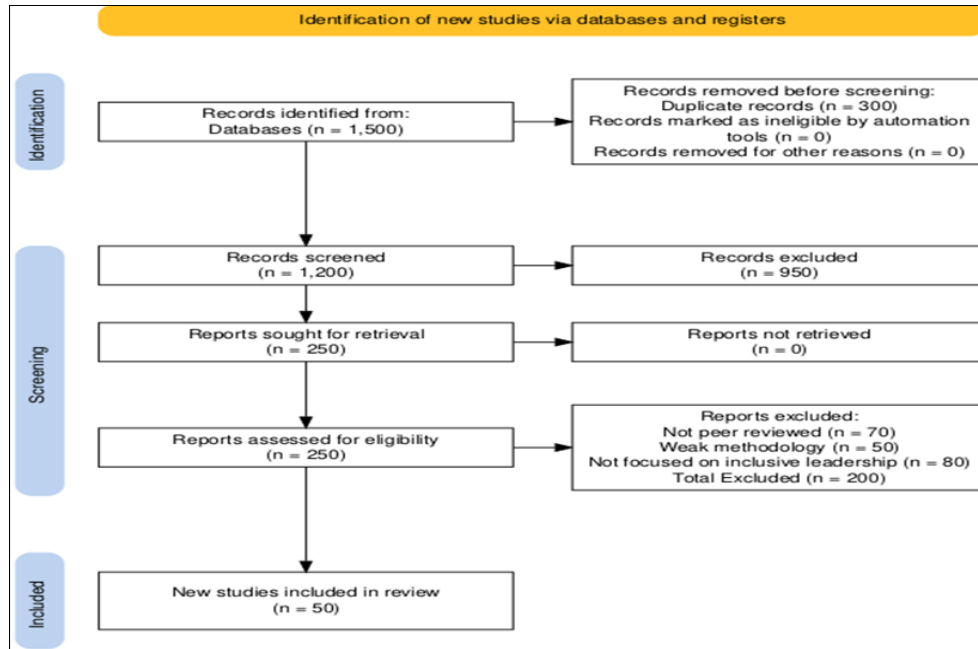


Fig 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Theoretical Implication

This review helps expand the extant literature on inclusive leadership through a synthesis of empirical evidence on how inclusive leaders' impact IWB and employee well-being. The results show that encouraging such inclusive leadership practices in organizations not only enhances individual outcomes but also provides a sense of benefit to organizations. This review highlights the need for greater convergence between leadership, employee innovation, and well-being from a theoretical perspective. A review also identified the key mediating mechanisms by which inclusive leaders impact these key outcomes, including psychological safety, social exchange, and transformational leadership.

Managerial Implication

This review is valuable for practitioners to attain a stronger understanding of the necessity of inclusive leadership to cultivate a culture that promotes innovation and employee wellness. Managers need to pay attention to inclusion leadership skills such as active listening, empowering employees, and diversity. Organizations also need to begin thinking about putting in place the training programs and performance management systems built to reinforce and reward inclusive leadership behaviors. In addition, organizations can create a psychological safety climate by allowing open communication, learning from mistakes, and recognizing employees' contributions.

Social Implication

The main findings of this review also have broader societal implications beyond the organizational context. Leadership can be inclusive to address the problems of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace, which are imperative for a more just and inclusive society. Strong jobs related to inclusive leadership influence the entire diversity and inclusion ecosystem. When

organizations prioritize inclusive leadership, they invest in their organizational fabric in addition to the external fabric, sending the message that diversity and inclusion are important to them. Finally, this review urges a wider understanding of the nature of inclusive leadership as a driver of both individual and organizational success processes. Organizations could bring the innovative potential of their workforce to life if they create inclusive leadership practices, which are fundamental to the well-being of employees and contribute to the nurturing of vibrant and sustainable communities.

Practical Implication

The results of this review show that inclusive leadership is both a concept and practice that can contribute positively to the well-being and culture of innovative work behavior among employees, thus providing actionable reference material to organizations seeking to achieve both internal and global sustainability goals. Organizations are advised to make significant investments in inclusive management development programs that focus on the notions of openness, psychological safety, and fair treatment that would allow the growth of their employees and other developmental goals at a larger scale, such as SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Moreover, inclusive leaders shape an environment in which employees feel a sense of value and are being listened to and develop active participation and voice behavior, which is an essential aspect of innovation, which is directly related to Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) of the SDGs. In addition, this type of leadership can lead to psychological well-being because it lowers the level of stressors in the workplace and ensures feelings of belonging, which is part of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). As inclusive leadership allows the recognition and utilization of different views to enhance innovation capacity, it contributes to SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). In addition, by incorporating inclusive leadership

philosophy in policies and systems, possible disparities could be remedied, thus fostering equity and equality at the workplace in support of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Therefore, inclusive leadership acts as a strategic facilitator in achieving sustainability of organizational practices, which is coupled with its compatibility with the worldwide Sustainable Development Goals.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions

Although substantial literature exists on inclusive leadership, IWB, and well-being, many gaps remain. Most analyses focus on the individual-level outcomes of inclusive leadership, with less attention paid to organizational-level impacts such as team dynamics, organizational culture, and long-term innovation outcomes. Research has been primarily situated within Western contexts, which requires further studies in non-western or cross-cultural settings to investigate how inclusive leadership shapes diverse populations. Future research may also focus on which specific behaviors and traits of inclusive leaders drive innovation and well-being. Longitudinal studies are also important to assess how IWB, via the mechanism of inclusive leadership, impacts employee well-being over the long term.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized findings from 50 studies that examined the effect of inclusive leadership on employees' innovative work behavior and employee well-being. Through psychological safety, empowerment, and social exchange, the analysis found that inclusive leadership positively impacts both innovation and well-being. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain relative to the mediation of these relationships in the context of particular organizational and contextual factors. This review highlights the importance of inclusive leadership in supporting innovation, worker health, and well-being. Valuing diverse perspectives and creating a psychological climate where employees feel safe in expressing ideas and taking risks is what inclusive leaders do to create an inclusive climate. In turn, this psychological safety fosters innovation and is important for overall well-being. The other aspect of inclusive leadership is the empowerment feature that allows employees to own their work by making decisions and playing a meaningful role in achieving organizational goals. However, this encourages innovative work behavior on the one hand and works to increase job satisfaction and reduce work-related stress. Based on the review, the social exchange perspective inherent in leadership highlights the reciprocal relationship between leaders and employees. If employees notice that their leaders are inclusive, they will return the favor with more engagement, commitment, and innovative effort, which can benefit both their well-being and that of the organization.

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