

Inclusive Leadership and Its Effect on Employee Performance Outcomes

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Abstract

Inclusive leadership has gained increasing attention as organizations seek leadership approaches that foster both equity and performance in diverse work environments. This study examines the effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes using a quantitative research design. Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey of 287 full-time employees working in medium to large organizations. Inclusive leadership was measured using a validated scale capturing leaders' openness, accessibility, and availability, while employee performance outcomes were assessed through task and contextual performance indicators. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The results reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance outcomes. Inclusive leadership was found to be a strong predictor of employee performance after controlling for demographic variables, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in performance outcomes. These findings support social exchange theory and social identity theory by demonstrating that inclusive leadership behaviors encourage employees to reciprocate with higher levels of performance and organizational contribution. The study contributes to the leadership and human resource management literature by providing empirical evidence on the performance-enhancing role of inclusive leadership within a highly diverse organizational context. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrating inclusive leadership principles into leadership development and human resource practices to enhance employee performance and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: inclusive leadership; employee performance; diversity management; human resource management.



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1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations operate in environments characterized by increasing workforce diversity, social complexity, and heightened expectations for equity and inclusion. As globalization and demographic shifts continue to reshape labor markets, leadership approaches that effectively harness diversity while fostering employee performance have become a central concern in human resource management and organizational behavior research (Shore et al., 2011; Randel et al., 2018). In this context, inclusive leadership has emerged as a critical leadership paradigm that emphasizes openness, accessibility, fairness, and the active involvement of employees in decision-making processes (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli et al., 2010). Inclusive leadership is commonly defined as leader behaviors that promote employees' sense of belonging while simultaneously valuing their uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Leaders who demonstrate inclusiveness encourage voice, respect diverse perspectives, and create psychologically safe environments in which employees feel empowered to contribute ideas and perform at their best (Edmondson, 1999; Randel et al., 2018). Prior studies suggest that such leadership behaviors positively influence important

work outcomes, including employee engagement, innovative work behavior, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019).

Employee performance outcomes remain a fundamental indicator of organizational effectiveness and sustainability. Performance reflects not only employees' task execution but also their discretionary behaviors that support organizational goals (Motowidlo et al., 1997; Koopmans et al., 2014). Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping these outcomes by influencing motivation, attitudes, and the quality of leader–employee relationships (Yukl, 2013). From the perspective of social exchange theory, inclusive leadership behaviors signal support and fairness, prompting employees to reciprocate through higher levels of effort and performance (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Similarly, social identity theory suggests that inclusive leaders strengthen employees' identification with the organization, which in turn enhances performance-related behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Empirical evidence increasingly supports the positive association between inclusive leadership and employee performance. Studies have shown that inclusive leadership enhances individual and team performance through mechanisms such as psychological safety, leader–member exchange quality, and employee engagement (Carmeli et al., 2010; Javed et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature has focused on Western or Asian contexts, with relatively limited empirical investigation in emerging and highly diverse economies. This represents a notable gap, particularly given that leadership effectiveness is shaped by socio-historical, cultural, and institutional factors (House et al., 2004).

South Africa provides a particularly compelling context for examining inclusive leadership. The country's workforce is characterized by deep cultural, racial, and socio-economic diversity, shaped by historical inequalities and ongoing transformation initiatives (Booyesen, 2007; April & Blass, 2010). Post-apartheid employment equity policies have placed strong emphasis on inclusive organizational practices, making leadership inclusivity both a moral and strategic imperative (Horwitz & Jain, 2011; Grobler et al., 2019). Despite this relevance, empirical, quantitative research explicitly linking inclusive leadership to employee performance outcomes within South African organizations remains limited and fragmented (Breevaart et al., 2014; Mostert et al., 2021). Furthermore, prior studies often emphasize attitudinal outcomes rather than direct performance indicators, leaving uncertainty regarding the extent to which inclusive leadership translates into measurable performance gains at the individual level (Koopmans et al., 2014; Javed et al., 2019). Addressing this gap is essential for advancing theory and providing evidence-based guidance for managers and human resource practitioners operating in diverse organizational environments.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to empirically investigate the influence of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes. By concentrating on individual-level performance and anchoring the analysis in well-established leadership and human resource management theories, this research aims to make a meaningful contribution to the expanding body of literature on leadership and organizational behavior. More specifically, the study extends existing knowledge by examining inclusive leadership within the context of a highly diverse labor market, where differences in background, culture, and work experiences present both challenges and opportunities for organizational effectiveness. Through this contextualized approach, the study provides empirical evidence that demonstrates the strategic role of inclusive leadership in fostering employee engagement, motivation, and productivity. In doing so, it highlights inclusive leadership not merely as a relational or ethical leadership style, but as a critical managerial capability that enhances individual performance and supports broader organizational goals. Ultimately, this study offers practical and theoretical insights that underscore inclusive leadership as an important driver of sustainable employee performance and long-term organizational success.

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes. A quantitative design was considered appropriate as it enables the statistical testing of hypothesized relationships between clearly defined variables and supports generalization of findings across organizational contexts. The study was grounded in a positivist research paradigm, emphasizing objectivity, measurement, and empirical validation of theoretical relationships within organizational settings. The target population consisted of full-time employees working in medium to large organizations across multiple industries in South Africa. A non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, was used to ensure that respondents had direct supervisory relationships and sufficient organizational tenure to evaluate leadership behaviors accurately. Data were collected from employees who had worked under their immediate supervisors for at least six months, a criterion adopted to enhance the validity of perceptions related to inclusive leadership. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed electronically, of which 287 usable responses were returned, yielding a response rate considered acceptable for organizational research.

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising previously validated measurement scales. Inclusive leadership was measured using a widely adopted scale developed by Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv, which captures leaders' openness, accessibility, and availability. Employee performance outcomes were assessed using an established individual work performance scale that measures task performance and contextual performance. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The use of validated instruments enhanced the reliability and construct validity of the measurements. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with a small sample of employees to assess clarity, wording, and internal consistency of the questionnaire. Minor refinements were made based on the feedback received. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with all constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Construct validity was further examined through confirmatory factor analysis to assess convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Data analysis was conducted using statistical software appropriate for multivariate analysis. Descriptive statistics were first generated to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and to examine data distribution. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore preliminary relationships among variables. To test the hypothesized effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes, multiple regression analysis was employed while controlling for relevant demographic variables such as age, gender, and organizational tenure. The assumptions of regression analysis, including normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, were assessed and met prior to hypothesis testing.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

This section presents the empirical results of the study, focusing on the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance outcomes. Data analysis was conducted using appropriate statistical software to ensure accuracy and robustness in examining the proposed relationships. Before testing the hypotheses, several preliminary analyses were undertaken to confirm the suitability of the dataset. These included descriptive statistical analysis to understand the general characteristics of the data and reliability testing to assess the internal consistency of the measurement instruments. The preliminary results indicate that the data met the basic statistical assumptions required for further analysis, thereby providing a sound foundation for hypothesis

testing. Conducting these initial checks is essential in empirical research, as it ensures that subsequent findings are not compromised by measurement errors or data inconsistencies. Overall, the preliminary analyses confirm that the dataset is adequate and reliable for examining the effects of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes.

As shown in Table 1, the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlation matrix provide further insights into the study variables. Inclusive leadership exhibits strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha value exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that the measurement items reliably capture the construct. Similarly, employee performance outcomes demonstrate satisfactory reliability, confirming the robustness of the scale used in this study. The correlation analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance outcomes. This finding suggests that higher levels of inclusive leadership are associated with improved employee performance, offering preliminary empirical support for the proposed relationship. The positive direction and significance of the correlation align with prior theoretical and empirical studies, thereby strengthening the validity of the research model and justifying further hypothesis testing using advanced analytical techniques.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach’s α	Inclusive Leadership	Employee Performance
Inclusive Leadership	3.82	0.61	0.89	1	
Employee Performance	3.76	0.58	0.87	0.54**	1

Note. N = 287. **p < .01.

To examine the hypothesized influence of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes, a multiple regression analysis was employed while controlling for key demographic characteristics, namely age, gender, and organizational tenure. The inclusion of these control variables was intended to isolate the unique contribution of inclusive leadership beyond individual background factors that may also affect performance. The results indicate that the overall regression model was statistically significant, suggesting that the set of predictors jointly explains a meaningful proportion of variance in employee performance outcomes. This finding confirms the adequacy of the model for hypothesis testing and provides initial empirical support for the relevance of inclusive leadership as an important organizational factor. By demonstrating a significant explanatory power, the regression results highlight that leadership behaviors characterized by openness, fairness, and inclusiveness are not merely symbolic but have tangible implications for employee effectiveness within the workplace.

As presented in Table 2, inclusive leadership was found to have a positive and statistically significant effect on employee performance outcomes. The standardized beta coefficient indicates that employees who perceive higher levels of inclusive leadership tend to demonstrate higher levels of job performance. This result underscores the importance of leaders who actively value diverse perspectives, encourage participation, and foster a supportive work environment. With regard to the control variables, organizational tenure exhibited a weak yet significant relationship with performance, suggesting that accumulated experience may modestly enhance employees’ ability to perform effectively. In contrast, age and gender did not emerge as significant predictors, indicating that performance differences in this context are not driven by these demographic factors.

Overall, these findings reinforce the central role of inclusive leadership in promoting positive performance outcomes.

Table 2. Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Performance Outcomes

Predictor	B	t	p
Inclusive Leadership	0.48	9.21	< .001
Age	0.06	1.12	0.263
Gender	-0.03	-0.71	0.478
Organizational Tenure	0.11	2.08	0.038
R ²	0.32		
Adjusted R ²	0.31		
F-value	32.84		< .001

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis examining the determinants of employee performance outcomes. The overall model is statistically significant, as indicated by an F-value of 32.84 ($p < .001$), suggesting that the set of predictors jointly explains a meaningful proportion of variance in employee performance. The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.32, along with an adjusted R^2 of 0.31, indicates that approximately 31–32% of the variability in employee performance can be explained by inclusive leadership, age, gender, and organizational tenure. This level of explanatory power can be considered moderate and acceptable for behavioral research. Among the predictors, inclusive leadership emerges as the most influential factor, exhibiting a strong and positive standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.48$, $t = 9.21$, $p < .001$). This finding provides robust empirical support for the hypothesis that inclusive leadership significantly enhances employee performance outcomes. Leaders who demonstrate openness, fairness, and respect for diverse perspectives appear to foster higher levels of employee effectiveness. In contrast, age ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.263$) and gender ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = 0.478$) do not show statistically significant effects, indicating that demographic characteristics play a limited role in explaining performance differences within this sample. Organizational tenure, however, shows a positive and statistically significant relationship with employee performance ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 2.08$, $p = 0.038$), suggesting that longer tenure may contribute to greater experience and job mastery. Overall, the findings underscore the critical role of inclusive leadership in driving superior employee performance beyond demographic factors.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling empirical evidence that inclusive leadership plays a central role in enhancing employee performance outcomes. The regression results demonstrate that inclusive leadership is the strongest predictor in the model, exhibiting a substantial positive effect on performance even after controlling for age, gender, and organizational tenure. With a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.48$ and a high level of statistical significance, the results clearly indicate that employees who perceive their leaders as inclusive tend to perform better in their roles. This finding reinforces the growing consensus in the leadership literature that inclusivity is not merely a relational or ethical attribute of leadership, but a critical driver of tangible performance outcomes. The strength of the relationship observed in this study is consistent with

prior empirical research suggesting that leaders who encourage employee voice, respect diverse perspectives, and create psychologically safe environments are more effective in motivating employees to exert higher levels of effort and engagement (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2018; Javed et al., 2019). Inclusive leaders foster conditions in which employees feel valued and acknowledged, which in turn enhances their willingness to contribute their skills and knowledge to organizational goals. The relatively high explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.32$) further suggests that inclusive leadership constitutes a meaningful organizational resource capable of explaining a considerable proportion of variance in employee performance, beyond demographic characteristics.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings lend strong support to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Inclusive leadership behaviors—such as fairness, openness, and recognition—signal organizational support and relational investment by leaders. Employees, in response, are likely to reciprocate through positive work behaviors, including higher levels of task performance. The significant association between inclusive leadership and employee performance observed in this study reflects this reciprocal process, whereby supportive leadership practices generate a sense of obligation and motivation among employees to perform at a higher level. In addition, the results are consistent with social identity theory, which emphasizes the importance of belonging and identification in shaping individual behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Inclusive leaders actively cultivate a sense of inclusion and respect, thereby strengthening employees' identification with their work group and organization. When employees perceive themselves as valued members of the collective, they are more inclined to align their efforts with organizational objectives, resulting in improved performance outcomes. The present findings suggest that inclusive leadership serves as a key mechanism through which positive social identities are reinforced in the workplace, translating into measurable performance benefits.

The significance of inclusive leadership is particularly salient in contemporary organizations characterized by workforce diversity. In such environments, differences in background, experience, and identity can potentially lead to misunderstandings or perceptions of exclusion. Inclusive leadership helps mitigate these risks by ensuring equitable treatment and encouraging participation from all employees. The strong positive effect identified in this study indicates that inclusive leadership enables employees from diverse demographic groups to perform effectively, thereby enhancing overall organizational functioning. Importantly, the non-significant effects of age and gender suggest that the performance-enhancing benefits of inclusive leadership are broadly applicable and not confined to specific demographic segments. This reinforces the notion that inclusive leadership operates as a universally relevant leadership approach rather than one that benefits only particular groups. Organizational tenure, while showing a weaker effect compared to inclusive leadership, nonetheless exhibits a positive and statistically significant relationship with employee performance. This finding implies that employees with longer tenure may demonstrate higher performance due to accumulated experience, organizational knowledge, and role familiarity. It is also possible that longer-tenured employees are better positioned to leverage inclusive leadership practices, as sustained interactions with leaders may strengthen trust and relational bonds over time. However, the comparatively smaller effect size of tenure underscores that leadership behaviors remain far more influential than demographic or experiential factors in explaining performance differences.

From a practical perspective, the findings carry important implications for human resource management and leadership development. Organizations seeking to enhance employee performance should prioritize the cultivation of inclusive leadership competencies among managers and supervisors. Leadership development initiatives should emphasize behaviors such as

active listening, transparent decision-making, and equitable treatment of employees. Furthermore, inclusive leadership principles should be embedded in performance appraisal systems, leadership selection processes, and succession planning to ensure that inclusivity becomes an integral component of organizational culture. By doing so, organizations can harness the performance benefits associated with inclusive leadership while also promoting fairness and employee well-being. Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method bias, potentially inflating observed relationships. Future research could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs, incorporating objective or supervisor-rated performance measures, and examining mediating mechanisms such as psychological safety, work engagement, or trust. Moderating variables, including organizational culture or team diversity, may also provide valuable insights into the boundary conditions of inclusive leadership effectiveness.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance outcomes using a quantitative approach within a diverse organizational context. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that inclusive leadership positively and significantly influences employee performance. Leaders who demonstrate openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse perspectives create work environments that encourage employees to contribute more effectively and perform at higher levels. These results reinforce the growing body of leadership literature that positions inclusive leadership as a critical driver of individual and organizational effectiveness. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to human resource management and leadership research by empirically validating social exchange theory and social identity theory within the context of inclusive leadership. The findings confirm that employees are likely to reciprocate inclusive leadership behaviors through enhanced performance, supporting the view that inclusive leadership fosters both relational and motivational mechanisms that drive performance outcomes. By focusing on individual-level performance rather than solely attitudinal variables, this study extends existing literature and offers a more comprehensive understanding of the performance implications of inclusive leadership. Practically, the results underscore the strategic importance of inclusive leadership in contemporary organizations characterized by workforce diversity. Human resource practitioners and organizational leaders are encouraged to integrate inclusive leadership competencies into leadership development initiatives, performance management systems, and talent management strategies. By doing so, organizations can not only promote equity and inclusion but also achieve sustainable improvements in employee performance and overall organizational effectiveness.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance outcomes. While the findings indicate a significant association, longitudinal data would be necessary to establish temporal causality. Second, the use of self-reported measures may introduce common method bias, as both the independent and dependent variables were collected from the same respondents at a single point in time. Additionally, the study relied on a non-probability sampling technique, which may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the sampled organizations and industries. Although the sample size was adequate for statistical analysis, it may not fully capture the diversity of organizational contexts. Finally, employee performance was measured using perceptual indicators

rather than objective performance metrics, which may be influenced by individual bias or social desirability.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal or experimental research designs to better capture the causal dynamics between inclusive leadership and employee performance. The use of multi-source data, such as supervisor-rated or objective performance measures, would help reduce potential bias and strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, future studies could incorporate mediating variables, such as psychological safety, employee engagement, or leader–member exchange, to further explain the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership influences performance outcomes. Further research may also explore moderating factors, including organizational culture, industry type, or team diversity composition, to determine the boundary conditions under which inclusive leadership is most effective. Comparative studies across different national or cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into the contextual sensitivity of inclusive leadership practices. Finally, future studies could adopt advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, to examine more complex relational models and enhance theoretical development in inclusive leadership and human resource management research.

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