



Inclusive leadership as a catalyst for employee and team performance: A systematic review of empirical evidence

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a systematic review of empirical research examining inclusive leadership as a driver of employee and team performance across various organisational contexts. It analyses studies published between 2015 and 2025. The initial search retrieved 138 records, which were then screened down to 22 studies for the final synthesis. The review outlines key mechanisms through which inclusive leadership impacts performance, including innovative work behaviour, work engagement, organisational commitment, and effective diversity management. The review outlines key mechanisms through which inclusive leadership impacts performance, including innovative behaviour, work engagement, organisational commitment, and effective diversity management. This study relied on Social Identity Theory (SIT). Results consistently show that inclusive leaders foster supportive and psychologically safe environments, allowing employees to share ideas, take risks, and collaborate, which boosts creativity, adaptability, and overall job performance. At the team level, inclusive leadership addresses challenges related to workforce diversity, promotes cohesion, and enhances collective problem-solving skills. Evidence also indicates that inclusive leadership produces better outcomes compared to traditional autocratic or directive styles. The review highlights the importance of inclusive leadership in expanding social exchange and self-determination theories while providing practical insights for organisational policies and leadership development. By embedding inclusive practices, organisations can turn diversity into a strategic advantage, encourage sustained engagement, and improve individual and team performance. This review presents inclusive leadership as a transformative approach that can drive innovation, foster equity, and support sustainable organisational success across diverse sectors and cultures. The study recommends that organisations should adopt inclusive leadership as a strategic approach to enhance their performance, engagement, and innovation.

Keywords: Employee Performance, Inclusive Leadership, Innovation, Team Performance

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-paced and highly competitive business environment, organisations face increasing pressure to maximise employee and team performance while managing workforce diversity. Managing workforce diversity effectively requires leadership approaches that not only admit these differences but also consider them to achieve strategic objectives (Williams, 2023). Leadership, therefore, plays a critical role in organizational success as it shapes culture, influences employee behaviour, guides performance expectations, and fosters collective purpose.

Traditional leadership styles, such as autocratic or purely directive approaches, have been increasingly criticized for their inability to address the complexities of modern organizational life. These approaches often limit communication, discourage employee participation, and suppress innovation, ultimately constraining organizational adaptability (Abdul Basit et al., 2017). As workplaces become more diverse and complex, there is a growing need for leadership models that prioritise openness, fairness, and inclusion. This has led to a greater emphasis on inclusive leadership. This style values diversity and actively involves employees by fostering a sense of belonging and recognition for their unique contributions (Randel et al., 2018).

Inclusive leadership is described as a set of behaviours that promote both belonging and individuality, helping individuals feel valued while fully contributing to organisational processes and outcomes (Shore & Chung, 2022). Research indicates that inclusive leaders foster psychologically safe environments where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas and taking risks, which drives innovation and improves performance (Javed et al., 2017). This leadership approach is vital in diverse teams, where differences in background and perspective can either be harnessed for creativity or lead to conflict. Ashikali et al. (2020) found that inclusive leadership moderates the challenges of cultural diversity by nurturing an inclusive climate, enabling team members to collaborate effectively and perform at higher levels.

Furthermore, inclusive leadership influences performance through various mediating mechanisms. Qi et al. (2019) demonstrated that inclusive leadership enhances perceived organisational support (POS), encouraging employees



to engage in innovative work behaviour (IWB). Likewise, Choi et al. (2015) emphasised that inclusive leadership raises work engagement and affective organisational commitment, both essential for sustaining individual and collective performance. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership is not only a direct factor affecting performance but also a catalyst for creativity, adaptability, and employee well-being.

In high-pressure sectors such as healthcare, the importance of inclusive leadership is even more apparent. Minehart et al. (2019) emphasised that inclusive leadership enhances interprofessional collaboration and decision-making, both vital for ensuring patient safety and quality of care. Similarly, Bataineh et al. (2022) showed that inclusive leadership predicts adaptive performance in healthcare teams by fostering innovative behaviours among staff. These insights highlight the broader significance of inclusive leadership in achieving better organisational outcomes.

Despite the increasing body of research, there remains a need to synthesise further and understand the pathways through which inclusive leadership influences performance at both individual and team levels. This study addresses this gap by reviewing empirical literature to examine the role of inclusive leadership in improving employee and team performance. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership contributes to organisational success, providing practical and theoretical insights for leaders, managers, and policymakers aiming to maximise performance in today's diverse workplaces.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study reviewed systematically the empirical literature on inclusive leadership and its impact on employee and team performance.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Inclusive leadership is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), which explains how leadership behaviours like inclusion, fairness, and recognition enhance individual employee and team performance. It further provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding mechanisms linking inclusive leadership to individual and collective outcomes.

2.1 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1986) explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. Inclusive leadership aligns closely with this theory by fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging within diverse teams. By acknowledging and valuing individual differences, inclusive leaders reduce intergroup biases and promote unity around common goals. This inclusive climate enhances team cohesion, communication, and collaboration essential conditions for collective performance (Ashikali et al., 2020; Meng et al., 2022). Moreover, inclusive leadership weakens subgroup divisions enabling employees to identify more strongly with the team as a whole. As a result, teams led inclusively demonstrate higher trust, mutual respect, and cooperation in performance.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a systematic review approach to examine inclusive leadership and its impact on employee and team performance. The method was selected to gather empirical evidence from published articles while ensuring transparency and reproducibility throughout the review process. The study focused on empirical publications from 2015 to 2025, covering both earlier and contemporary perspectives on inclusive leadership as a factor influencing organizational outcomes. The main objective was to consolidate findings showing how inclusive leadership practices affect employee behavior, teamwork, and organizational achievement. To maintain methodological rigor, the review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, which provides a structured procedure for identifying, screening, and reporting research evidence. This framework helped to ensure clarity in documentation, consistency in evaluation, and reliability in the synthesis of studies on inclusive leadership and performance.

A detailed and systematic search strategy was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals in leadership, management, organizational behavior, and social sciences. Boolean operators and keyword combinations were applied to generate relevant results using search terms such as inclusive leadership, employee performance, team performance, innovation, work engagement, and diversity management. The search initially retrieved 138 records published between January 2015 and May 2025. After the removal of duplicate records, 122 articles remained for screening. Following title and abstract review, 97 articles were retained for detailed examination. After applying inclusion criteria and verifying full-text availability, 59 articles met the initial requirements for full-text analysis. Following the quality appraisal stage, 22 studies met all inclusion standards and were selected for the final synthesis.



The screening process followed a structured two-stage approach designed to ensure that only studies meeting the eligibility criteria were retained. In the first stage, the titles and abstracts of the 122 articles were reviewed to exclude irrelevant materials that did not focus on inclusive leadership or performance outcomes. The second stage involved full-text screening guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria adapted from the SPIDER framework, which considers Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research Type. Studies qualified for inclusion if they investigated inclusive leadership in organizational contexts, examined employees or teams as participants, and presented empirical results derived from quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs. Studies excluded at this point included theoretical commentaries, dissertations, conference papers, and those examining leadership in educational settings unrelated to organizational performance.

The quality of the 22 included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which evaluates methodological transparency and reliability across various research designs. Each study was appraised for appropriateness of sampling, data collection procedures, and analytical methods. Additional evaluation criteria included clarity of variable definitions, alignment between research objectives and chosen methodologies, and logical presentation of findings. Only studies published in reputable journals indexed within Quartile 1 to 3, or those demonstrating clear scholarly merit, were retained. The application of MMAT ensured that the final set of studies represented strong methodological quality and credible evidence suitable for synthesis. This procedure minimized bias and enhanced the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the reviewed materials.

Data extraction and synthesis were guided by a thematic analysis approach that identified recurring themes and patterns linking inclusive leadership to employee and team performance. Each study was coded based on publication year, research design, country of origin, and thematic focus to facilitate comparison across different contexts. Major themes identified included psychological safety, innovative work behavior, organizational commitment, diversity management, and employee engagement. These categories captured the main pathways through which inclusive leadership enhances collaboration, creativity, and commitment among team members. The thematic organization of results provided an orderly presentation of how inclusive leadership operates within organizations to foster performance improvements and employee growth.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Direct Influence of Inclusive Leadership on Employee Performance

The reviewed studies consistently affirm that inclusive leadership directly enhances employee performance through trust-building, recognition, and empowerment. Bataineh et al. (2022) reported that inclusive leadership predicts adaptive performance among healthcare workers, with innovative work behavior mediating this relationship. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2019) found that inclusion improves intrinsic motivation, person–job fit, and employee well-being, leading to stronger task performance. Ke et al. (2022) observed that inclusive leadership improves public-sector performance through workplace spirituality, suggesting that inclusive leaders cultivate meaning and accountability among employees. Umrani et al. (2024) extended this evidence by showing that psychological capital mediates the relationship between inclusion, well-being, and performance. Taken together, these findings converge on the view that inclusive leadership drives job performance by shaping supportive environments where employees feel valued, capable, and engaged in achieving organizational goals.

4.1.2 Innovation as a Mechanism Linking Inclusive Leadership and Performance

Innovation emerged as a key process through which inclusive leadership contributes to improved performance outcomes. Lei et al. (2019) demonstrated that inclusive leadership enhances perceived organizational support, which stimulates innovative work behavior that translates into higher productivity. Ye et al. (2019) confirmed that team voice mediates the link between inclusion and team innovation, with performance pressure further strengthening this relationship. Saleem et al. (2023) found that inclusive leadership moderates the connection between knowledge sharing and innovative work behavior, indicating that inclusiveness amplifies the effect of collaboration on creativity. Javed et al. (2019) showed that vigor at work mediates the influence of inclusive leadership on adaptive performance, demonstrating that inclusion sustains energy and persistence. Collectively, these studies align in establishing that inclusive leadership operates as an enabling mechanism for innovation by promoting openness, experimentation, and shared responsibility.

4.1.3 Work Engagement, Commitment, and Psychological Capital

A prominent pattern in the reviewed literature is the influence of inclusive leadership on work engagement, affective commitment, and psychological well-being. Choi et al. (2015) found that inclusion enhances work engagement by fulfilling employees' needs for belonging and recognition, which leads to increased creativity and persistence. Umrani et al. (2024) demonstrated that psychological capital mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership,



well-being, and performance, emphasizing that inclusion strengthens optimism, confidence, and resilience. Gong et al. (2024) identified that inclusive leadership fosters work meaningfulness and resilience capacity, which together enhance task performance. Similarly, Ke et al. (2022) discovered that workplace spirituality transmits the positive effects of inclusive leadership on performance through a sense of shared purpose. Synthesizing these findings reveals that inclusive leadership improves both the emotional and psychological resources employees need to remain engaged and productive, confirming its central role in sustaining organizational vitality.

4.1.4 Team-Level Inclusion, Diversity Management, and Collaboration

At the team level, inclusive leadership was found to be crucial in turning workforce diversity into a source of productivity and collaboration. Ashikali et al. (2020) showed that inclusive leadership mitigates the challenges of cultural and demographic diversity by creating climates of respect and belonging. Meng et al. (2022) demonstrated that inclusive leadership reduces identity faultiness and strengthens team identification, which promotes cohesion and cooperation. Minehart et al. (2019) provided evidence that inclusiveness enhances communication and collaboration within healthcare teams, improving coordination and shared decision-making. Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022) further explained that inclusive leadership strengthens organizational inclusion by aligning individual uniqueness with collective objectives. When viewed together, these studies reveal that inclusive leadership transforms potential sources of division into assets for creativity and unity, leading to stronger team-level performance and improved organizational integration.

4.1.5 Boundary Conditions and Diverging Effects of Excessive Inclusiveness

Although most studies highlight the positive effects of inclusive leadership, some evidence indicates that excessive inclusiveness may weaken performance outcomes. Saleem et al. (2023) identified an inverted U-shaped relationship between inclusive leadership and task performance, where moderate inclusiveness enhances performance but excessive inclusion leads to slower decision-making and role ambiguity. Nguyen et al. (2019) also noted that while inclusion increases well-being and recognition, overly accommodative leadership without clear performance direction may reduce accountability and focus. These findings diverge from the dominant trend by highlighting that inclusiveness must be balanced with goal orientation and performance clarity. Together, they suggest that inclusive leadership functions optimally when it combines openness with firm expectations, ensuring that empowerment does not compromise organizational discipline.

4.2 Discussion

The results of the review show that inclusive leadership enhances employee performance by creating environments characterized by trust, recognition, and empowerment. This improvement occurs because employees feel valued and motivated, which supports adaptability and stronger task outcomes. Evidence from healthcare settings suggests that adaptive performance is influenced by inclusive leadership through mechanisms such as innovative work behavior (Bataineh et al., 2022). Inclusion also strengthens intrinsic motivation, person-job fit, and employee well-being, which collectively lead to higher performance, a point highlighted in the work of Nguyen et al. (2019). Further implications include the role of workplace spirituality, through which employees experience meaning and accountability, as discussed by Ke et al. (2022). Moreover, the development of psychological capital mediates the relationship between inclusion, well-being, and performance, illustrating how optimism and resilience support sustained employee engagement (Umrani et al., 2024; Ain et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that inclusive leadership operates not only through task-directed strategies but also by shaping supportive organizational climates that foster engagement and capability.

The review indicates that inclusive leadership stimulates innovation by promoting openness, knowledge sharing, and collaborative practices, which ultimately enhance productivity. Organizational support nurtured by inclusion encourages employees to explore new ideas, translating creative thinking into actionable results, a process described by Lei et al. (2019). Team-level mechanisms such as team voice also mediate the relationship between inclusion and innovation, particularly when performance expectations encourage accountability, as highlighted by Ye et al. (2019). The interplay between knowledge sharing and innovative work behavior is amplified under inclusive leadership, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in fostering creativity, as noted by Saleem et al. (2023). In addition, employee vigor, supported by inclusive practices, sustains adaptive performance, reflecting how inclusion maintains energy and persistence during challenging tasks (Qurrahtulain et al., 2022). Collectively, these observations demonstrate that inclusive leadership functions as an enabling factor for innovation by providing social and psychological conditions conducive to experimentation and shared responsibility.

Results show that inclusive leadership strengthens work engagement, commitment, and psychological resources by fulfilling employees' needs for belonging and recognition. Increased engagement contributes to creativity and task persistence, and these effects are observed when psychological capital such as optimism and confidence is developed through inclusive practices, as highlighted by Umrani et al. (2024). Work meaningfulness and resilience also improve



under inclusion, which enhances overall performance outcomes (Gong et al., 2024). Employees experience a sense of shared purpose that amplifies engagement and strengthens their capacity to meet organizational objectives, an effect further supported by Ke et al. (2022). These findings indicate that inclusive leadership sustains performance not only through operational guidance but also by reinforcing the emotional and cognitive resources necessary for employees to remain productive and committed over time.

The review demonstrates that inclusive leadership turns workforce diversity into an asset for collaboration and cohesion. By fostering climates of respect and belonging, inclusion reduces challenges linked to cultural and demographic differences, which strengthens team identification and cooperation, as shown by Meng et al. (2022) and Ashikali et al. (2020). Improved communication and shared decision-making emerge when inclusiveness aligns individual uniqueness with collective objectives, a point noted by Minehart et al. (2019) and Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022). These dynamics reveal that teams led inclusively can convert potential divisions into collective advantage, resulting in higher cohesion and enhanced performance. This suggests that team-level benefits of inclusion extend beyond social harmony, directly influencing coordination, productivity, and organizational integration.

Although inclusive leadership generally enhances performance, the review highlights potential drawbacks when inclusiveness becomes excessive. Moderate levels of inclusion optimize task performance, but overly accommodating leadership can slow decision-making and create role ambiguity, a phenomenon discussed by Qi et al. (2019). Without clear guidance, inclusion may reduce accountability and focus, diminishing the effectiveness of empowerment strategies, as observed by Nguyen et al. (2019). These results imply that inclusive leadership is most effective when combined with goal-oriented practices and structured expectations. Balancing openness with clarity ensures that employee autonomy does not undermine organizational discipline, demonstrating that the benefits of inclusion are contingent on thoughtful application.

4.2.1 Implications of the Findings

The findings of this review have significant implications for Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and organizational performance in Tanzania. Inclusive leadership emerges as a key driver of employee engagement, motivation, and psychological capital. This suggests that HRM strategies should include leadership development programs that focus on empowerment, recognition, and participatory decision-making. Recruitment, promotion, and performance appraisal systems should incorporate inclusiveness as a central principle. Ensuring that employees feel valued and supported enhances productivity and strengthens adaptability. HRM policies that encourage innovation through knowledge sharing, collaboration, and team voice can improve problem-solving capacity and responsiveness. At the team level, promoting diversity management and inclusion allows organizations to transform differences in skills, experience, and perspectives into cohesion and competitive advantage. HRM interventions must also balance empowerment with clear performance expectations. This approach prevents ambiguity, maintains accountability, and ensures that inclusive practices lead to tangible results. Strategically designed inclusive HRM practices can enhance employee well-being, strengthen team effectiveness, and improve organizational outcomes in Tanzania. They provide a clear pathway for sustainable growth and stronger overall performance.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The review demonstrates that inclusive leadership plays a vital role in enhancing employee performance, innovation, engagement, and team collaboration. The findings show that HRM practices in Tanzania need to integrate inclusive approaches in leadership development, recruitment, promotion, and performance management to create supportive work environments. Inclusion strengthens psychological capital and well-being while enabling teams to leverage diversity as a source of cohesion and productivity. At the same time, maintaining clear performance expectations ensures that empowerment translates into tangible results. Strategically embedding inclusive practices within HRM systems can improve organizational effectiveness, foster sustainable growth, and strengthen competitiveness across public and private sectors in Tanzania.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that organizations should adopt inclusive leadership as a strategic approach to enhance their performance, engagement, and innovation. This can be achieved through leadership development programs that enhance empowerment, active listening, and diversity management skills among managers. Human resources management systems like recruitment, promotion, and appraisal, should incorporate inclusiveness as a key aspect to promote fairness and recognition. Encouraging knowledge sharing, teamwork, and employee voice will foster innovation and collaboration among diverse groups. However, leaders need to balance inclusiveness with clear goals and accountability to prevent ambiguity and maintain efficiency. Promoting diversity management and psychological safety can further enhance cohesion and adaptability.



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