

Conceptualizing The Influence Of Inclusive Leadership On Individual Work Performance: The Mediator Role Of Psychological Safety

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual article investigates the influence of inclusive leadership on individual job performance and the mediator role of psychological safety. The focus is primarily on inclusive leadership to ensure psychological safety in the workplace, which is crucial for improving creativity, engagement, and job satisfaction. This study emphasises the gap in understanding how these variables interact in academic settings by examining the literature on inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and individual job performance. The research confirms that inclusive leadership creates a supportive work environment where employee resilience and innovation are increased through psychological safety. As the mediator, psychological safety also helps to understand how inclusive leadership can positively impact individual work performance, thus contributing to employee well-being and organizational success. The practical implications of this research are significant, as it provides insights into how leadership styles can enhance employee performance in diverse and inclusive workplaces, offering valuable guidance to practitioners in organizational behavior and leadership studies.

KEYWORDS: Individual Work Performance (IWP); Inclusive Leadership; Psychological Safety.

ABBREVIATIONS: IWB: Innovative Work Behavior; LMX: Leader-Member Exchange; IWP: Individual Work Performance; IWPQ: Individual Work Performance Questionnaire; SDT: Self-Determination Theory; CWB: Counterproductive Work Behavior; TP: Task Performance; CP: Contextual Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the complex relationship between inclusive leadership and individual job performance, with a particular emphasis on the mediating role of psychological safety. It is essential to understand how leadership styles can affect performance. Inclusive leadership has attracted attention because it creates an environment where employees feel valued and heard. After all, they feel safe to express themselves as they become more deeply engaged in their work and have the freedom to be innovative and creative without fear of negative criticism. This enhances their overall job satisfaction and job performance. However, there is still a gap in the literature in understanding how inclusive leadership in South African higher education institutions can improve individual job performance by creating an environment where employees feel psychologically safe. The research thus contributes to the existing knowledge about leadership and performance outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focuses on inclusive leadership (independent variable), psychological safety (mediator variable), and IWP (dependent variable).

2.1 INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

An inclusive leadership style supports the achievement of organizational outcomes and employee wellbeing. It promotes critical factors such as psychological safety, psychological empowerment and organizational learning [1,2,3]. Inclusive leadership fosters a supportive work environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, concerns, and ideas without fear of negative consequences, thereby nurturing psychological safety [1]. Employees should be encouraged to engage positively in IWB and consider different opinions. Wang and Shi [4] argue that inclusive leadership can have a positive impact on employees' prosocial rule-breaking behaviors by nurturing psychological safety, which can then further lead to creative solutions and new approaches to operational processes. According to Younas *et al.* [2], psychological safety should be emphasised to encourage open communication and creativity. Thus, the connection between

inclusive leadership is explained, and in turn, it impacts how employees express their opinions or make decisions. The benefits of Inclusive Leadership include improving psychological empowerment, where employees feel safe and have greater autonomy over their work, which helps build their confidence and motivates them to perform better. Proactive Behaviors such as open communication and engagement in innovative work practices are thus encouraged [5].

Siyal *et al.* [5] find that inclusive leadership positively influences innovative work behaviors through intrinsic motivation, an essential aspect of psychological empowerment. The study by Wang and Shi [4] places particular emphasis on the psychological safety and leadership alignment that can serve as mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and engagement in prosocial rule-breaking.

The necessity of organizational learning is critical as the relationship between inclusive leadership and extra-role behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (and innovative work behaviors), is moderated. Aboramadan *et al.* [3] argue that continuous learning and knowledge exchange will motivate employees to do more than just their formal responsibilities. Therefore, LMX relationships strengthen and promote inclusive leadership. LMX also demonstrates the critical contribution of inclusive leadership to psychological safety, enabling employees to identify with their leaders and feel a sense of belonging. Creating a work environment that encourages IWB and prosocial behavior is vital [4]. Inclusive leadership enhances job satisfaction by fostering a supportive and empowering work environment, characterised by psychological ownership and thriving employees [3]. Thus, inclusive leadership encourages employees to feel a sense of ownership and well-being. According to Gbobaniyi *et al.* [6], inclusive leadership also improves employee loyalty and commitment by providing employees with support and loyalty.

2.2 INDIVIDUAL WORK PERFORMANCE

A comprehensive framework was developed by Koopmans *et al.* [7] for measuring IWP. Koopman *et al.*'s [7] framework is highly regarded and can integrate dimensions and constructs from various fields. These include TP, CP, and CWB, among others. De Coning [8] again found a significant correlation between psychological capital and IWP. Shore and Chung [9] mainly highlight the influence of organizational culture on IWP with multiple associations for TP, CP, and CWB in different cultures. Van der Vaart [10] again emphasises the positive association between work resources and TP and CP, as well as their negative association with CWB. Gerekan *et al.* [11] claim that technostress (i.e., the stress or discomfort experienced when individuals struggle to adapt to new technologies or feel overwhelmed by constant technological demands) positively predicts IWP.

Ridwan *et al.* [12] and Paais and Pattiruhu [13] found that perceived organizational support, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, motivation and organizational culture positively influence IWP. Boccoli *et al.* [14] emphasised that employee engagement has a positive impact on individual performance and well-being, especially in hybrid work environments. However, Van der Lippe and Lippényi [15] pointed out the challenges in knowledge sharing and coordination when physical presence is lacking due to coworkers working from home. This leads to a decrease in individual employees' performance. Semaihi *et al.* [16] suggested that talent management does not directly affect IWP but enhances managerial support. Vieira dos Santos *et al.* [17] revealed a link between high individual performance, high harmonious passion (i.e., being highly motivated and passionate about one's work in a way that brings satisfaction and aligns with personal values without leading to burnout or obsession), and job crafting efforts.

Fragoso *et al.* [18] found that high-performance work systems positively influenced organizational commitment and individual performance. Veingerl Cic *et al.* [19] and Hjalmarsson and Däderman [20] identified comprehensive employee development strategies and emotional intelligence as positive factors affecting IWP. Abun *et al.* [21] highlighted the association between employees' attitudes toward work and their job performance. They also identified the significant impact of organizational politics on IWP. Sabir *et al.* [22] stressed the effect of affective and sustained organizational commitment on IWP. Mayangsari *et al.* [23] found a significant positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and IWP, while Khan *et al.* [24] found that intrinsic motivation has a positive influence on work performance. Lastly, Duarte *et al.* [25] confirmed the positive influence of authentic leadership on individual performance.

2.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is a crucial component of inclusive leadership. Edmondson [1] defines it as the belief that one will not be penalized for sharing ideas, asking questions, or raising concerns. Psychological safety in the workplace impacts how individuals perceive their work environment. It involves believing coworkers will support them when taking risks [1,26]. Developing friendships at work is essential for increasing job satisfaction and engagement, according to Edmondson and Lei [27]. Collaboration among individuals with varying levels of experience, challenging tasks, specialised roles, and diverse backgrounds helps achieve organizational goals. However, the success of such cooperation depends heavily on psychological safety [27]. Prioritising the psychological safety of individuals in the workplace has been emphasised by Leroy *et al.* [28] and Kostopoulos *et al.* [29], who argue that when employees experience psychological safety, they feel shielded from risk.

Recent studies in various fields have expanded existing theories regarding the link between psychological safety and performance, considering the mediating roles of job design and job thriving. For example, Aboramadan *et al.* [3]

investigated the intersection of positive psychology and job design concepts to explore the underlying mechanisms of psychological safety and performance. The findings suggest that employees can enhance their job satisfaction by adjusting their mindset, engaging with colleagues, and managing tasks more effectively when they feel their workplace is a safe and supportive environment. This helps to improve their performance.

These theories are applied in various settings. An in-depth comparison by Edmondson *et al.* [30] illustrated significant variations in psychological safety between healthcare and education, highlighting noticeable differences in the impact of hierarchical status and leadership effectiveness. Higher status and effective leadership were associated with increased psychological safety in healthcare and education. The type of work had a more pronounced effect on psychological safety in education than in healthcare. Cho *et al.* [31] found that psychological safety is positively correlated with job satisfaction and patient safety and negatively correlated with intent to leave. According to Aksoy and Mamatoğlu [32], psychological safety improves professional self-efficacy, promoting self-reported personal initiative among occupational safety specialists. Tkalic *et al.* [33] suggest that spontaneous interaction contributes to psychological safety, which is more achievable in an office setting and more challenging in a remote work environment. Remote work can impede psychological safety due to increased thresholds for behaviors such as speaking up and asking for help. Hybrid work could lead to the isolation of remote workers, resulting in feelings of exclusion and fear of missing out. Gender differences in psychological safety were highlighted by Lim [34], who found that men benefited more from task knowledge awareness. At the same time, women experienced greater psychological safety due to their increased awareness of presence in virtual teams. Kim *et al.* [35] highlighted the negative impact of degrading supervision (i.e., poor or disrespectful management, where supervisors treat employees in a belittling or harmful manner). This type of supervision can reduce employees' sense of psychological safety and impact their willingness to share knowledge or collaborate effectively.

2.4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL WORK PERFORMANCE

The impact of inclusive leadership on employee job performance is significant and far-reaching. Through various mechanisms, leaders who embrace inclusive practices contribute to better employee performance and engagement. According to the social exchange theory, fair treatment by leaders leads to improved employee performance and engagement. For example, inclusive behavior by supervisors can enhance employees' job performance and make them feel valued, motivating them to return to work with increased effort and productivity [36-38]. In addition, inclusive leadership promotes employees' psychological safety by creating an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their ideas and taking risks without fear of negative consequences. This psychological safety increases employee engagement and innovative behaviors, leading to higher overall performance [39,40].

Another critical aspect among employees is the development of resilience. Inclusive leadership offers both emotional and instrumental support to employees, enabling them to build resilience and navigate setbacks more effectively. Resilient employees are also better equipped to perform well even in challenging conditions. The resource conservation theory supports this by suggesting that inclusive leadership helps employees acquire and maintain the resources necessary to perform effectively and overcome challenges [41,42]. Inclusive leadership improves the employees' perception of the value of their work and leads to improved performance. Employees who find their work necessary are more likely to exhibit lower levels of anxiety and depression, along with higher job satisfaction and purposefulness. According to Mostafa [43], psychological safety intrinsically motivates employees to perform better and stay committed to their tasks. Inclusive leadership creates a positive organizational culture, emphasizing employees' sense of belonging and individuality. Thus, emphasis should be placed on employee motivation to improve their dedication and willingness to exceed their job requirements. The cultural transformation toward inclusivity not only has a positive impact on individual performance but plays a significant role in increasing overall organizational effectiveness" [4,44]. Inclusive leadership positively impacts organizational performance by ensuring psychological safety in a workplace, developing resilience, emphasizing the provision of meaningful work and motivating prosocial behavior among employees. Thus, it contributes to higher job satisfaction, increased innovation, and better job performance.

2.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AS A MEDIATOR

Psychological safety integrates several critical concepts from organizational behavior and psychology and is essential for explaining and understanding psychological safety theory [1]. Research confirms that psychological safety affects many aspects of the workplace [3, 45-47]. This suggests that team members are more willing to take interpersonal risks, such as admitting their mistakes, asking questions, or presenting new ideas, if they are convinced that it is a safe environment with no adverse consequences. Psychological safety thus positively impacts open communication, creativity and learning, which are essential for team performance.

Self-esteem and psychological safety mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and the perception of bullying in a work environment [47]. Aboramadan *et al.* [3] also note that psychological safety mediates the relationship between co-worker knowledge sharing and employee voice. Joo *et al.* [46] found that psychological safety fully mediates the links between organizational trust and group conflict, as well as the connection between employee empowerment and group conflict.

Various studies have reported multiple findings on psychological safety as a mediator. Durrah's study [48] did not find a mediating role of psychological safety between friendship opportunity, friendship prevalence, and innovative behavior. Heyns *et al.* [49] found that psychological safety mediates between supervisor support and work participation. Yasin *et al.* [50] demonstrated that psychological safety mediates the relationship between spiritual leadership, knowledge sharing, and intellectual capital. Thelen *et al.* [51] found that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between leader motivating language and employee advocacy. Qian *et al.* [52] highlighted that psychological safety mediates the relationship between leader humility and feedback-seeking behavior. Xu *et al.* [53] revealed that psychological safety mediates organizational climate/innovation orientation, IWB and the relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement. A link exists between psychological safety and inclusive leadership, where project success serves as the mediator, according to Khan *et al.* [24].

However, there is still a gap in the knowledge base as the role of psychological safety as a mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and IWP in the South African higher education context has not been explored. This study aims to fill the gap and thoroughly examine the role.

2.6 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The most significant theories of psychological safety include the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, Social Identity Theory, Relational Leadership Theory, LMX Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Diversity Mindset Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Learning Theory.

Brewer's [54] theory supports the concept of inclusive leadership. This theory posits that individuals strive to balance assimilation (conforming to others) and differentiation (being unique). Li [55] argues that inclusive leadership uses this theory to create an environment where employees feel they belong and recognise their uniqueness. Thus, inclusive leaders can create an environment to improve organizational commitment and engagement [55].

According to Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner [56], an individual's sense of self is derived from their membership in social groups. Environments that promote psychological safety, reinforce group identity, and enhance performance are essential for individuals, as they help them feel valued and supported. Social Identity Theory emphasises the need for a psychologically safe climate to strengthen team collaboration. The Social Identity Theory is also essential for inclusive leadership success [56]. Individuals acquire a sense of self-esteem and identity from the social groups to which they belong. Leaders who practise inclusive leadership focus on developing a strong sense of belonging by recognising the diverse social identities within their teams and establishing a cohesive group identity. This view is highlighted in the work of Shore and Chung [9], who argue that inclusive leadership behaviors, such as reducing status differences and encouraging diverse perspectives, help strengthen working group identification and psychological safety. Relational leadership theory again emphasises the quality of relationships between leaders and followers, which is essential for promoting inclusion. According to Roberson and Perry [57], inclusive leadership involves behaviors that promote high-quality relationships characterized by equality, mutual respect, and power-sharing. Thus, these behaviors contribute to an inclusive climate that ensures all contributions are considered in decision-making, thereby improving team cohesion and performance [57].

The LMX theory focuses on the dyadic relationships between leaders and followers. In the context of inclusive leadership, high-quality LMX relationships are defined by mutual duty, trust, and respect. Thus, followers' feelings of inclusion and appreciation can improve within the team. Employers encourage work practices that have a positive impact. Guo *et al.* [38] examine how inclusive leadership promotes leadership identification and employee engagement, with LMX quality serving as a moderator of these relationships.

The social exchange theory, as posited by Blau [36], asserts that employee performance is influenced by an organisation's social and relational exchanges. Thus, inclusive leadership promotes openness, accessibility and availability through trust, and employees are encouraged to engage in positive work behaviors. Korkmaz *et al.* [58] argue that creating inclusive leadership fosters a sense of psychological safety and inner motivation among team members, which in turn aids creativity, engagement, and organizational learning. When psychological safety is high, trust is ensured, leading to positive exchanges between team members and promoting knowledge sharing, while reducing group conflict. Employees who experience high organizational support and fairness are more likely to reciprocate with higher performance. Where employees go beyond their formal job descriptions in response to positive organizational exchanges, it is particularly relevant to understand organizational citizenship behavior [36].

Van Knippenberg and Van Ginkel [59] proposed the diversity mindset theory. This is a critical theoretical perspective for combining inclusive leadership and diversity management. This theory emphasises the importance of cognitive diversity in team environments. The theory also motivates inclusive leadership to share information, encourage openness to diverse perspectives, and focus on teamwork to fully leverage the benefits of diversity.

The SDT, as proposed by Ryan and Deci [60], posits that inclusive leadership is beneficial in the workplace and emphasises the critical role of internal and external motivation in shaping IWP. Li [55] argues that inclusive leadership must first meet the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and commitment, ultimately leading to greater employee motivation and well-being. Internal motivation primarily stems from a person's desires, such as interest and enjoyment in their job, and therefore has a positive influence on performance outcomes. A significant difference in external

motivation is experienced and driven by external rewards, but this does not always lead to sustainable performance improvements. The essence of a work environment where workers feel safe is emphasised by this theory, which develops internal motivation for optimal performance [60]. Thus, inclusive leaders focus on creating a work environment that meets all these needs by promoting workplace equity, integration, and diversity, improving job satisfaction and organizational commitment [55]. Zeng *et al.* [61] argue that inclusive leadership encourages open communication, constructive feedback, autonomy promotion, and proactive employee engagement, thus contributing to psychological safety.

The learning theory Schein [62] places particular emphasis on the fact that psychologically safe environments promote learning behavior. This includes individual feedback and discussing errors. Individuals are encouraged to participate in these learning behaviors without fear of negative consequences. Thus, psychological safety is essential in these interactions, allowing individuals to openly express their thoughts and challenges, facilitating more in-depth learning and collaboration.

2.7 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF INDIVIDUAL WORK PERFORMANCE

IWP has several foundations. Campbell's [63] model has a significant influence on this foundation. It identifies performance as behaviors and actions, aligns with organizational goals, and divides work performance into three primary dimensions: TP, CP, and CWB. Task performance is directly related to core work responsibilities, while CP involves additional behaviors that further contribute to reaching organizational goals, and CWB can negatively impact organizations [63]. Borman and Motowidlo [64] build on Campbell's work, differentiating between TP, which involves a relationship between technical work branches, and CP, which refers to activities that contribute to the social and psychological core of the organisation. The JD-R model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti [65], is primarily used to gain a deeper understanding of how individual work processes function. According to the model, job demands (such as workload and time pressure), work resources (such as support and autonomy), and employee burnout and engagement are affected, negatively impacting their performance. Thus, high job demands lead to burnout, while sufficient resources can improve employee engagement and positively impact performance. The model has been used extensively to examine how the work environment affects individual performance [65].

2.8 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

Transformational leaders strive to enhance employee performance by fostering a sense of purpose and motivation, thereby promoting a more engaged workforce. Several studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership has a positive impact on job performance by enhancing intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and employee engagement [24, 66]. Transformational leadership theory also emphasizes the importance of leadership styles in maximizing employee potential and driving performance [66]. Eisenberger *et al.* [67] propose the organizational support theory, which argues that employees who are valued and supported by their organisation show improved job satisfaction and performance. The theory validates that perceived organizational support links leadership behavior and job performance and emphasises the importance of managerial practices that create a supportive work environment [67].

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a systematic literature review to collect secondary data, critically evaluate research studies, and quantitatively summarize findings. A systematic literature review is a "systematic, precise, comprehensive, and repeatable method used to identify, assess, and summarise an existing body of work completed and recorded by researchers, scholars, and practitioners [68].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive leadership is logically described as a multidimensional concept that involves, among other things, behaviors that encourage a sense of belonging and uniqueness among team members. To promote employee engagement, creativity and job satisfaction, an approach must be taken to ensure that all voices are valued and included in decisions [9,55]. Numerous studies validate the role of inclusive leadership in fostering psychological safety in the workplace, a crucial factor that encourages employees to engage actively. Zeng *et al.* [61] found that inclusive leadership promotes psychological safety, leading to higher creative behaviors and proactive engagement. Guo *et al.*'s [38] study claims that leader identification mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice behavior, with power distancing moderating these effects. The focus of the literature review is on the development of valid and reliable measures of inclusive leadership.

Li [55] uses his Inclusive Leadership Questionnaire to establish the different dimensions of inclusive leadership behaviors, such as equity, integration, and the implementation of diversity policies. The Inclusive Leadership Questionnaire is, therefore, a valuable, theoretically grounded tool to examine the assessment of inclusive leadership and its impact on various workplace outcomes. Van Knippenberg and van Ginkel's [59] research combines inclusive leadership with a diversity mindset. It emphasises the necessity of leaders in promoting inclusion and the cognitive benefits of diversity. The primary goal is to enhance team performance by fostering the exchange of information and leveraging diverse perspectives to drive innovation.

Ashikali *et al.*'s [69] research focuses mainly on the public sector. It highlights that inclusive leadership significantly mitigates the adverse effects of team diversity on an inclusive climate by fostering an environment of openness and appreciation for differences. This finding underscores the significance of context in comprehending the effectiveness of inclusive leadership. Ashikali *et al.* [69] examined the determinants of inclusive leadership in public organisations. They identified leadership humility and supportive organizational cultures (e.g., group and development cultures) as critical factors that promote inclusive leadership behaviors. The study emphasises inclusive leadership, which is more likely to thrive in an environment that values diversity as a learning resource and encourages openness to diverse perspectives.

Korkmaz *et al.* [58] systematically reviewed inclusive leadership research, emphasising the factors that precede it, the mediators, outcomes and associated circumstances. They recommend using a multi-level model to integrate these elements and gain a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership operates at different levels within an organisation. Roberson and Perry [57] provide a thematic analysis that combines several theoretical perspectives on inclusive leadership. They emphasise inclusive leadership attitudes and behaviors that promote an inclusive work climate by reducing status differences and encouraging consideration of multiple perspectives. This integrated approach gives a more detailed understanding of how inclusive leadership can be applied. Several studies focus on developing leadership programmes that enhance inclusive leadership behaviors. Training leaders to practise empathy, fairness, and openness to feedback can further help create a more inclusive work environment and improve overall team effectiveness [9,70].

A comprehensive assessment of the literature on IWP identifies important conclusions and patterns directly relevant to how IWP can be defined, assessed and influenced by different variables. Koopmans *et al.* [7] consider RD IWP a multidimensional construct that encompasses task performance, CP, and CWB. Several duties related to "people's job descriptions" fall under task description, while CP includes extra-role behaviors that, in turn, make a positive contribution to the organizational environment [71]. The most used tool to measure IWP behavior is the IWPQ. Van der Vaart [10] claims that the construct validity of the IWPQ has been tested in diverse cultural settings. The validity and reliability are confirmed by measuring the three dimensions of job performance in South Africa.

Many previous studies have examined the relationship between leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and IWP. The studies find that transformational leadership has a positive influence on employees' intrinsic motivation, which in turn impacts their job performance [24]. Transformational leaders inspire employees to be positive and create a shared vision. Individual support is provided to all positive employees, ensuring task performance improves and reducing counterproductive behaviors [24]. According to these findings, inner motivation mediates between transformational leadership and job performance. If intrinsically motivated, employees are likelier to tackle all their job tasks enthusiastically. Thus, their work performance improves, which is beneficial in the workplace [24]. The SDT also supports this finding, claiming intrinsic motivation can give rise to higher engagement and better performance [60].

Previous studies indicate that increasing isolation and a lack of social support can reduce individual performance when colleagues engage in social laziness or work from home [15]. Emphasis is also placed on the need for a supportive work environment to maintain a high IWP. Thus, employee burnout has a negative impact on IWP. Decreased task performance and increased CWB are mainly due to high burnout levels, including emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation [72]. Some interventions can reduce burnout and be implemented to motivate transformational leadership, thereby increasing inner motivation and enhancing job performance [24].

IWP measures, such as the validity of the IWPQ, can change depending on the cultural context. Van der Vaart [10] finds a great need for culturally appropriate adaptations of performance evaluation tools in South Africa to ensure accurate evaluations. It emphasises the importance of context-specific research in developing appropriate IWP measurements for all situations. Knickerbocker and Tawfik [73] find that psychological safety can positively impact learner-learner interactions in online healthcare education, resulting in improved engagement and learning outcomes.

Cai *et al.* [74] argue that development-oriented supervisor feedback is essential and leads to employee innovation, with psychological safety mediating this relationship. Tkalic *et al.* [33] emphasise the importance of psychological safety in remote teams and suggest aligning hybrid work modes and encouraging in-person communication to enhance psychological safety in these teams. Joo *et al.* [46] argue that psychological safety mediates the relationship between organizational trust, empowering leadership, and group conflict, which lowers conflict levels, especially in knowledge-based organisations.

Moreover, Chughtai [45] emphasises that psychological safety mediated the relationship between trust propensity and job performance, with employees who felt safe in their work environment demonstrating higher performance and affective commitment. Dar *et al.* [75] found that overqualified employees are more engaged in innovative behaviors when psychological safety is present, allowing them to take creative risks without fearing negative consequences. Afshan *et al.* [76] argue that perceived fairness in interactions and supervisory justice have a positive impact on psychological safety, reduce team conflict, and improve collaboration. Psychological safety can be enhanced through training interventions focusing on team collaboration [77]. Dusenberry and Robinson [77] motivate a holistic management approach to establish and promote psychologically safe environments. Emphasis is placed on the importance of psychological safety in mediating relationships between supervisory justice and conflict management, especially when there is much contradiction [78].

Carmeli *et al.* [39] argue that psychological safety in the workplace moderates the effects of procedural and interactional justice on team conflicts. This promotes group harmony and reduces task and interpersonal conflicts. Organizational support from colleagues and supervisors positively influences psychological safety in the workplace. It also contributes to sharing ideas and promoting team risks, creating a more inclusive and collaborative workplace [1]. Psychological safety in virtual teams is related to good communication in the workplace and emphasises supportive digital interactions to positively impact team performance in remote work setups [79]. Tucker and Edmondson [80] argue that psychological safety is crucial for team learning and the delivery of quality care in healthcare. Psychological safety motivates employees to communicate and share innovative ideas, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making [81]. Supportive relationships between tutors and peers increase psychological safety in educational settings. Students are then more comfortable participating in discussions as the environment is safe, and they are not judged [27]. Therefore, psychological safety in organizational environments is essential and significantly impacts team learning, performance, and collaboration. It can serve as a protective factor in stressful environments, fostering trust and cooperation across different industries [82].

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

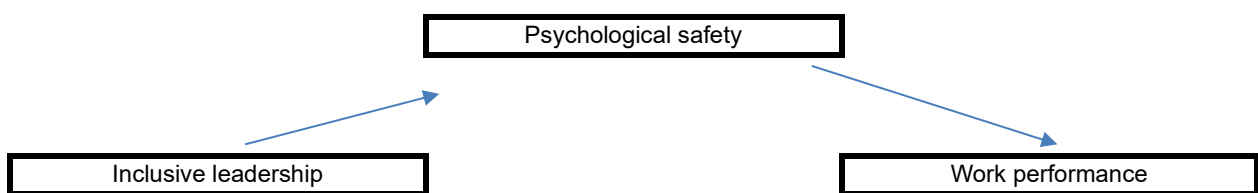


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.

The conceptual framework suggests that inclusive leadership is crucial for fostering psychological safety and enhancing individual work performance, particularly in higher education. The unique dynamic between all the different concepts is fundamental in driving innovation, engagement, and overall organizational success [4,47]. This framework considers Inclusive Leadership essential to shaping psychological safety and influencing individual work performance. Edmondson [1] and Younas *et al.* [2] argue that inclusive leadership leaders can create an environment where employees always feel valued and empowered. It provided both emotional and instrumental support, contributing to a sense of belonging and participation in decision-making [41, 54, 83]. Carmeli *et al.* [39] and Nembhard and Edmondson [40] also emphasise psychological safety, arguing that increasing employee engagement and fostering creativity and motivation are promoted. It mediates inclusive leadership and IWP, and impacts TP, CP, and CWB [7, 61, 63, 64].

The mediating role of psychological safety supports this, as it converts inclusive leaders' behaviors into improved individual work outcomes [47, 84]. The proposed framework is also strengthened by theoretical support from the SET, SDT, and LMX theories [36, 38, 60]. Therefore, the dynamic relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and IWP supports innovation, employee engagement, and overall organizational success, particularly in the context of higher education [4, 47].

6. GAPS IN CURRENT RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Most studies on inclusive leadership have been conducted in Western contexts, resulting in a lack of research confirming these findings in non-Western or cross-cultural settings. Understanding how inclusive leadership is perceived and implemented across different cultures, including varying norms, values, and power dynamics, remains unexplored [55,69]. Cross-cultural studies are needed to determine the generalisability of current frameworks and models. Most existing research is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to conclude the causality and long-term effects of inclusive leadership on employee and organizational outcomes. There is a gap in understanding how inclusive leadership behaviors develop over time and their sustained impact on employee engagement, innovation and organizational culture [38,61]. Although some studies have identified mediators (e.g., psychological safety, leader identification) and moderators (e.g., power distance) in the relationship between inclusive leadership and outcomes, there is a need for more comprehensive research on other potential factors. For instance, how individual attributes (e.g., personality traits), team characteristics (e.g., diversity), and organizational variables (e.g., culture) might influence these relationships is still underexplored [9,38]. Some studies, such as those on integrating inclusive leadership with diverse mindsets or psychological safety, propose conceptual frameworks. However, empirical studies are lacking in testing these integrative models to determine their validity and effectiveness in different organizational settings [9,59]. There is a considerable gap in understanding how inclusive leadership affects marginalised and diverse groups within organisations. Most studies fail to differentiate the experiences of different demographic groups based on race, gender, ethnicity, or disability, despite the importance of inclusion in promoting diversity.

More focused research on the impact of inclusive leadership on various marginalised groups and their specific needs is therefore crucial [9]. Most research on inclusive leadership has been conducted in corporate or private sector settings. Thus, there is a significant gap in examining inclusive leadership in other sectors, such as healthcare, education, government, and non-profit organisations, where the dynamics and leadership styles may differ [69, 85]. Research taking place in these areas can provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of inclusive leadership. Although some studies provide theoretical guidance on developing inclusive leadership skills, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of specific leadership development programmes and interventions. Research should, therefore, also focus on evaluating different training methodologies (e.g., workshops, coaching) and their impact on developing inclusive leadership behaviors [57]. The increasing prevalence of digital and hybrid work environments creates a greater need to understand how inclusive leadership can be practised effectively when face-to-face interactions are limited. Thus, the dynamics of inclusive leadership in virtual teams and the ridiculous role of technology-mediated communication require further exploration [70]. There is a growing body of literature on inclusive leadership, but it contains a gap in comprehensive meta-analyses that synthesise findings across different studies, contexts, and methodologies. In addition to identifying common trends, inconsistencies, and opportunities for further research, these studies contribute to a more coherent understanding of the effects of inclusive leadership [85]. It is, therefore, essential to thoroughly research the limitations, vulnerabilities, and shortcomings highlighted in this research on IWP. Many gaps have been identified in the research, and the importance of addressing these issues to advance knowledge in this field is emphasized [19, 25, 86-88].

Sectional data, which makes it more challenging to determine the cause-and-effect relationship of factors, is a drawback of much research [25]. Duarte *et al.* [25] claim that the correlation design they use in their study does not allow conclusions to be drawn about cause-and-effect relationships. Long-term research designs are recommended to provide a better insight into how the variables may interact over time [25]. Studies such as those by Vargas Pinto *et al.* [88] also utilise data collected from a single source, which may have introduced standard method variance (CMV). A multi-source approach or implementing time-delayed designs can benefit and reduce risks [88]. Studies under review mostly have limited generalizability due to non-probabilistic samples or samples limited to specific sectors or geographic locations. For example, Veingerl Cic *et al.* [19] focused their study on the services sector in Slovenia, thereby limiting the applicability of their findings to other industries or countries. They recommend expanding future research to enhance the external validity of the findings. It is crucial to examine additional variables that negatively affect individuals' job performance, as Vargas Pinto *et al.* [88] claim. They insist on exploring variables such as "bring your own device" policies. Other studies also express concern about the validity and reliability of the measuring instruments used. Duarte *et al.* [25] note, among other things, that some measures bring mean variance-extracted (AVE) values below the acceptable threshold and suggest that these measures should be refined to improve psychometric traits. Self-reported performance data can lead to biases, such as social desirability bias [86,87]. Alternative assessment methods, such as peer reviews or objective performance measures, are suggested to reduce potential biases [86,87].

The feasibility of studies within specific organizational or cultural contexts, as conducted by researchers such as Duarte *et al.* [25], may not apply to other settings. The suggestion is that these studies be replicated in different organizational and cultural settings to validate the findings across contexts [25]. A significant need arises to foster more complex relationships, such as moderating and mediating effects. Duarte *et al.* [25] find that ethical infrastructure or organizational virtue can moderate the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance.

The literature review highlights several limitations and recommendations for future research on psychological safety. Many of these studies reviewed focus on specific sectors, particularly healthcare and education, which limits the generalizability of findings in other industries and cultural contexts [1,35]. Expanding the scope of the study to include a broader range of sectors, such as high-risk industries like construction or law enforcement, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of psychological safety in diverse contexts. Most research employs cross-sectional designs, which hinder the development of causal links between psychological safety and its consequences. These limited understandings of how psychological safety evolves and affects long-term organizational behavior [1]. Several studies employ self-report measures that may be susceptible to response bias, particularly when evaluating sensitive variables such as interpersonal risks or leadership behavior [31]. Fewer studies address how individual personality traits, organizational structures, or country cultures can weaken the benefits of psychological safety. Instead, most of the research focuses on team-level dynamics. This leads to an inadequate understanding of how psychological safety operates in individual and organizational contexts [46].

Future research should, therefore, adopt longitudinal designs to conduct a thorough investigation and focus on how psychological safety develops and sustains itself within organizations over time [1, 35]. The relationship between psychological safety and long-term outcomes, including employee retention, innovation, and organizational commitment, can be explained by longitudinal studies. Further research is needed to better understand how psychological safety operates in diverse cultural and national contexts.

Comparative research determines how leadership styles, individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and other factors influence psychological safety in non-Western contexts [33]. Future studies should incorporate objective measures, such as direct observations, 360-degree feedback, or behavioral indicators of psychological safety, to address

concerns about reaction bias. The reliability and validity of results can thus be improved [31]. To include more diverse industries and organisation types, expanding the scope of research to non-profit organisations, government agencies, or creative industries can positively contribute to understanding how psychological safety affects performance in different settings [89]. Future research can provide a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of psychological safety if these limitations are addressed and the recommendations are followed, resulting in a positive impact and better adaptation in different organisations.

7. MANAGERIAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Through the literature synthesis, management and practical recommendations can be derived to promote inclusive leadership and improve psychological safety, ultimately positively influencing IWP and team collaboration. Thus, organisations should develop and implement leadership training programmes that emphasise improving inclusive behaviors, such as fairness, openness to feedback, and fostering a sense of belonging and uniqueness among team members [9,70]. These programmes should include hands-on exercises that promote empathy, foster equity, and encourage appreciation of diverse perspectives. Virtual teams utilise technology to maintain open lines of communication and foster an inclusive environment where everyone's voice is heard.

Customized leadership development programmes for public sector organizations, emphasizing humility, equity, and transparency in leadership behavior, are essential [69]. Therefore, a particular emphasis should be placed on developing leaders who can successfully deal with diversity and create an inclusive environment. It is essential to discuss what power distancing entails in leadership practices and where leaders are encouraged to reduce status differences, creating an environment where staff members feel free to express their thoughts [38].

A high-trust work environment must be built by motivating open communication and encouraging connections between managers and staff. Ensuring trust in the workplace can thus promote organizational success [45,46]. Open-door principles also improve individual productivity and team cohesion. Therefore, it is essential to implement wellness initiatives and team-based therapies in the workplace that can cope with social loafing and burnout. These programmes also recognise individual contributions, provide adequate assistance and encourage teamwork [15].

The IWPQ can be used to measure IWP and ensure that it is culturally adapted to different contexts [10]. These tools also include TP, CP, and CWB. Finally, it is crucial to lead team-building activities that focus on collaborating and exchanging different opinions among employees [57]. The focus of these interventions should be on reducing status differences and establishing a balance that allows team members to share their thoughts freely in a psychologically safe atmosphere.

8. CONCLUSION

The critical role that inclusive leadership plays in improving IWP, primarily through the mediating influence of psychological safety, is mainly promoted in this study. The study also confirms that inclusive leaders positively impact employees and make them feel safe, valued, and empowered. This has a direct impact on workers' productivity and engagement. Psychological safety is, therefore, an essential medium through which inclusive leadership achieves improved work performance. It also addresses the need for and emphasises cultivating trust and inclusion among leaders' work teams. This research helps in understanding leadership dynamics in the South African higher education sector. According to this research, there are broader implications for organisations looking to improve employee performance through inclusive leadership practices. Therefore, future research should focus on exploring the finer details of this relationship across cultural and organizational contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally to this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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