

Role of Inclusive Leadership in Project's Success with the Mediating Role of Employee Engagement and Trust in Leader

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ABSTRACT

Aim of study: This study investigates the role of inclusive leadership in project success along with the mechanism of employee engagement and trust in leaders as mediators among the IT based firms of Pakistan.

Methodology: A self-administered questionnaires was distributed to 250 employees who are working in IT project based firms and a total of N = (210) questionnaires were returned. Hayes macro model was used mediation and moderation analysis.

Results: The results reveal that inclusive leadership plays a very significant role in achieving the project success through the mediation of employee engagement and trust in leaders. Overall this study discloses that inclusive leadership is very crucial as it affects the employee engagement and project success so strategies should be design in order to train the top management in inclusive leadership style.

Conclusion: The study concluded that by enhancing inclusivity in leadership style organizations can maximize the employee engagement at workplace and also increases the trust in leader so organizations should promote open and transparent communication reinforcing its importance as a psychological mechanism through which inclusive leadership influences project success. So organizations should design the policies that can help their leaders on attaining the skills through which they can improve inclusivity in organization.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Employee engagement, Trust in Leader, Project Success.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive leadership is described by leader behaviors that nurture openness, availability, accessibility, respect and consideration of individual differences. Such leader's wants that each employee feel valued and involved (Garg & Chhikara, 2025; Shore & Chung, 2022). Inclusive leadership draws on social exchange theory that states when employees feel supported and value by their leaders, they reciprocate it with higher engagement and positive organizational outcomes because inclusive leaders addresses the fundamental human needs of feeling belonged and being valued (Rogozińska, 2023; Sumaira, Haji & Nadeem, 2024). Despite growing empirical studies highlights the importance of inclusive leadership but

still it's an area of emerging research (Madikizela, 2022; Bolden et al., 2023; Anane & Atiku, 2023; Carmeli et al., 2010; Nishii, 2013; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Shore et al., 2011).

It has been observed that inclusive leaders build an atmosphere in which team members can express themselves freely and positively without indulging themselves into negative outcomes (Shore & Chung, 2022). Inclusive leadership is further closely associated with decreased turnover and increased employee engagement (Lacerenza et al., 2024). Recent research shows that inclusive leadership not only results into positive organizational outcomes but it also significantly increases the team building and employee involvement (Nguyen, 2025). By valuing diverse viewpoints, inclusive leaders reinforce the collaboration and develop team problem-solving capabilities (Narayan et al., 2024). Such leadership enhances psychological safety, which enables the employees to communicate openly and take risks without distress of negative consequences. It also increases employee engagement and job satisfaction and reduces turnover (Urme, 2023). Moreover, inclusive leadership supports in creating an organizational culture that ensures fairness and respect, matches the societal expectations regarding diversity and equity, that results in enhancement of customer satisfaction and also helps in long-term leadership development of employees (Zia-ur-Rehman, 2023).

Inclusive leadership is characterized by behaviors that not only value, respect, and leverage diversity but also promotes a sense of association among employees. And in the context of projects inclusive leaders boost open communication, co-creation, and engagement in decision-making processes that enhances the project success (Mir, Rafique & Mubarak, 2021; Shafi et al., 2023). As inclusive leadership promotes employee engagement leading towards the project success (Nawaz & Qayyum, 2022). It is very crucial to understand how inclusive leadership effects project outcomes as organizations heavily rely on cross functional teams to complete the complex projects and inclusive leadership is linked with team dynamics, strong collaboration and creativity, all of which contributes towards the successful project delivery (Aslam, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023).

This study analyzes that how leaders can develop the atmosphere within the organization in which employees are considered valued leading towards engagement and developing trust in leaders and this will guide leaders across diverse sectors in adopting inclusive practices that reinforce collaboration, enhance employee satisfaction and sustained the project success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Leadership and Project Success

Inclusive leadership is described as a leadership style that respects diversity, supports fairness, and care for giving value to employees so they can actively participate in decision-making processes (Van & Van, 2022). Inclusive leaders exhibit openness, accessibility, and a commitment to empower their teams by encouraging translucent communication and nurturing mutual respect (Orekoya, 2024). When leaders display inclusive behaviors such as respect, openness, and sensitivity to all employees' perspectives then it is more likely that employees reciprocate with higher levels of commitment, trust, and engagement (Ly, 2024). From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (SET), inclusive leadership is known as a positive organizational resource that nurtures trust within teams. Such leadership style boosts culture in which employees sense support, enabling them not only to share their thoughts and take risks but also to cooperate effectively toward attaining mutual goals without fear of negative consequences (Siyal, 2023).

Project success is defined as the level to which a project meets its planned goals, meeting timelines, managing budget constraints and adhering to quality standards. Inclusive leadership behaviors such as asking input from all team members, practicing active listening, endorsing diversity, and make sure equitable participation in decision-making that leads towards forming an atmosphere of respect in which employees who belonged to diverse backgrounds become comfortable and appreciated along with the feeling of being listened (Nishii & Leroy, 2022). So inclusive leadership is probable to augment project

success by increasing the collaboration, adaptability and engagement among employees that are essential for achieving positive project outcomes at workplace (Watanabe et al., 2024; Burr, 2024).

H1: Inclusive leadership has the positive association with project success.

2.2 Inclusive Leadership, Employee engagement and Project Success

Employee engagement is considered as an optimistic factor in the organizational setting defined by high levels of vigor, perseverance, and immersion required by the organization for the outstanding performance. The employees who are engaged tend to exhibit passion and commitment towards their tasks which results in good performance and increased job satisfaction (Eseye & Debebe, 2024). The significance of inclusive leadership lies in its ability to positively shape team dynamics, foster employee engagement that will improve the project success. Inclusive leaders nurture an environment in which employees become intensely involved in their work targets, sharing of ideas without the fear of being negatively judged and cooperate effectively with colleagues (Narayan et al., 2024). It has been depicted that inclusive leadership fosters trust, engagement, and creativity that is needed for the successful project implementation (Baykal & Divrik, 2023).

As Inclusive leadership helps in creating the psychological safety due to the open communication, mutual respect, and trust among team members which in turn, enables employees to share ideas freely and take necessary risks for effective project management. (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) Inclusive leaders also enhance work engagement by making employees feel valued and motivated so they become more energetic, dedicated, and focused on their tasks (Shore & Chung, 2022). The increased level of engagement in employees makes them more productive, committed and resilient that will improve the project success (Jiang et al., 2023).

Inclusive leadership creates a culture that facilitates open and collaborative communication supporting successful project execution (Baykal & Divrik, 2023). Hence work engagement is proposed to mediate between the association of inclusive leadership and project success. Inclusive leadership enhances engagement, which subsequently contributes to improved project success (Zhao et al., 2023). Because employee energy, passion, and commitment to their work translating as employee engagement is a key mechanism linking leadership behaviors to project performance. By cultivating a sense of value and motivation, inclusive leadership increases work engagement that enables the team members to display greater productivity, resilience, and dedication that contribute towards to project success (Lacerenza et al., 2024).

H2: Inclusive leadership has the positive association with employee engagement.

H3: Employee engagement has the positive association with project success.

H4: Employee engagement positively mediates between the association of inclusive leadership and project success.

2.3 Inclusive Leadership, Trust in Leader and Project Success

Trust is known as a mental state of embracing the intent to admit the susceptibility based upon optimistic anticipations of the intent or behavior of the other individual (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust is the inclination towards the vulnerability because of the positive expectation from the other person actions. Trust has long been considered as an important area of research as it is connected with a number of job-related determinants and outcomes (DeConinck, 2011).

Trust is a key element of effective leadership and is extensively documented as a vital factor for organizational well-being. High levels of mutual trust between leaders and followers can accomplish strong relationships (Bal et al., 2011; Chang & Wong, 2010). When employees develop trust in their leaders they start exhibiting high levels of extra role behaviors (Siyal et al., 2021). Inclusive leaders, who are characterized by respectful and fair treatment of subordinates, empower employees to seek direction

and coordination that fulfills the employees' psychological expectations (Randel et al., 2018) because when employees recognize that their leaders sincerely care for them, the leader-member relationship becomes stronger that increases the mutual trust. So when employees feel supported treated with equity and provided with sufficient work opportunities in such situation their trust in leadership indeed increases.

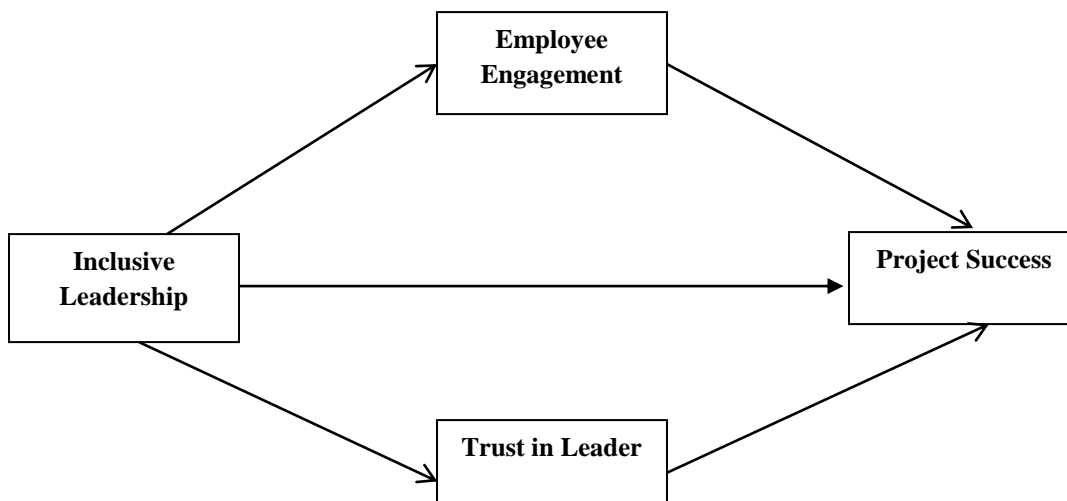
Trust in leader plays a vital role in envisaging positive work attitudes and behaviors (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). The respectful and fair feature of inclusive leadership enhances employees' trust in leader. As a result, employees showcase positive attitudes and increased effort in their work to avoid disappointing their leaders (Avolio et al., 2004). So trust in a project leader can be seen as important determinant of project outcomes. Trust can be defined as team members' belief in the leader's honesty, capability, and compassion (Lewicki et al., 2006). This trust in leader reinforces cooperation, communication, and risk-taking that lead towards project success (Weimar et al., 2017).

H5: Inclusive leadership has the positive association with Trust in Leader.

H6: Trust in Leader has the positive association with project success.

H7: Trust in leader positively mediates between the association of inclusive leadership and project success.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and Sample

A self-administered questionnaire was used in this study to collect the data from the employees. The questionnaires were distributed to 250 employees who are working in IT based organizations that are dealing with projects. A total of 210 respondents' data was used for the analysis of this study.

3.2 Sources of Instrumentation

3.2.1 Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership was assessed with the 13 items scale developed by Ashikali (2019). The Cronbach Alpha value of this study was 0.87.

3.2.2 Work Engagement

Work Engagement was assessed with the 13 items scale developed by Crawford, LePine and Rich (2010). The Cronbach Alpha value of this study was 0.82.

3.2.3 Trust in Leader

Trust in leader was assessed by a scale developed by Ötken & Cenkci (2012) It consists of 10 items. Cronbach Alpha value of this study was 0.79.

4.2.4 Project Success

Project Success was assessed by a scale developed by Aga et al. (2016). It consists of 14 items. Cronbach Alpha value of this study was 0.81.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

	Frequencies	Percentages
Year of Employment		
Employment Less than 1 year	64	30.5
More than 1 year to 2 years	22	10.5
3 years to 4 years	23	11.0
More than 4 years	101	48.1
Qualification		
Bachelors	66	31.4
Masters	46	21.9
Anyother	98	46.7
Marital Status		
Married	145	69.0
UnMarried	65	31.0
Gender		
Male	125	59.5
Female	85	40.5
Age		
20 to 30	83	39.5
31 to 40	56	26.7
41 to 50	25	11.9
51 and above	46	21.9

4. RESULTS

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Inclusive Leadership	4.71	0.501	1			
2 Employee Engagement	4.12	0.582	0.678**	1		
3 Trust in Leader	3.84	0.463	0.518**	0.196	1	
4 Project Success	3.96	0.583	0.698**	0.495**	0.743**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The correlation results depicted the positive association between Inclusive leadership, employee engagement and trust in leader. It also reflected the positive connection between inclusive leadership and project success. It is also depicted from the results that employee engagement and trust in leader plays a very important role in achieving the project success. Whereas as inclusive leadership positively supports

in enhancement of the employee engagement and building trust in leader.

Table 3: *Inclusive Leadership, Psychological Safety and Project Success.*

Predictors	Coeff	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Inclusive leadership → Project Success	.3428	8.16	.000	.4293	.6259
Inclusive Leadership → Employee Engagement	.2193	3.94	.003	.3178	.5987
Employee Engagement→ Project Success	.3481	5.31	.000	.3971	.4825
Inclusive Leadership→ Employee Engagement→ Project Success (c' path)	.2683			.1582	.3791

The results in table 3 supported the hypothesis H1, H2, H3 and H4. It has been confirmed that Inclusive leadership and project success have a significant positive relationship with the Coeff value of $.3428 < 0.001$. Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported through the results. The result of testing Hypothesis 2 shows that the relationship between Inclusive leadership and employee engagement is positively linked as the coefficient value is $.2193 < 0.01$, hence results also confirmed the hypothesis 2 is accepted. Results also reveal that there is significant positive association between employee engagement and project success with the Coeff value of $.3481 < 0.001$ hence hypothesis 3 is also accepted. It is also confirmed from results that employee engagement mediates between the association of inclusive leadership and project success. Hence hypothesis 4 is also accepted.

Table 4: *Inclusive Leadership, Trust in Leader and Project Success.*

Predictors	Coeff	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Inclusive leadership → Project Success	.4427	7.16	.000	.5284	.9258
Inclusive Leadership → Trust in Leader	.3194	10.94	.000	.4186	.6975
Trust in Leader→ Project Success	.4682	8.31	.000	.4971	.7843
Inclusive Leadership→ Trust in Leader → Project Success (c' path)	.3684			.2574	.4378

The results in table 4 supported the hypothesis H5, H6 and H7. It has been confirmed that Inclusive leadership and trust in leader have a significant positive association with the Coeff value of $.3197 < 0.001$. Hypothesis 5 is therefore supported. The result of testing Hypothesis 6 shows that trust in leader and project success is positively linked as the coefficient value is $.4682, < 0.01$, hence hypothesis 6 is accepted. It is also confirmed from results that trust in leader mediates between the association of inclusive leadership and project success. Hence hypothesis 7 is also accepted.

5. DISCUSSION

A very crucial element for the project success is leadership, especially leadership that fosters inclusivity as it is defined by openness, valuing diversity, and stimulating a culture of fairness which boosts the organizational performance. Leaders who practice inclusivity develop an environment which allows the employees to feel respected and empowered, which can drive higher levels of team collaboration and productivity .It is very important to considerate and analyze the mechanism through which inclusive leadership can affects project success such as work engagement and trust in leader. This study examines the effect of inclusive leadership on project success with the mediating effects of work engagement and trust in leader. So if leadership will allow employees to feel safe and appreciated it will result in increased engagement and consequently higher quality of projects leading towards the project success. The results also shows strong evidence that the inclusive leadership is positively related to trust in leaders. The result of this study supports the previous work that highlights the importance of inclusive leadership for creating a positive organization that helps to deliver project goals. Inclusive leaders tend to produce workplaces in which team members are treated with respect and have the opportunity to flourish, in turn producing increased team collaboration, commitment, and output (Baykal & Divrik, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023; Olutimehin,2024; Orekoya, 2024). As a way of ensuring inclusivity and a sense of worth and

participation organizations can increase the likelihood of project success. The results emphasize the role of leadership based on cooperation and empowerment in managing project execution and organizational goals can lead towards project success.

6. CONCLUSION

By enhancing inclusivity in leadership style organizations can maximize the employee engagement at workplace and also increases the trust in leader so organizations should promote open and transparent communication reinforcing its importance as a psychological mechanism through which inclusive leadership influences project success. So organizations should design the policies that can help their leaders on attaining the skills through which they can improve inclusivity in organization.

6.1 Future Direction

Future research should give attention on the determinants of inclusive leadership it is suggested to analyze the role of gender and personality type on inclusive leadership. Role of contextual factors such as culture should also be analyzed between the connection of inclusive leadership and project success as moderator. Future studies can also analyze this model to other industries to investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on project success.

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