Inclusive Leadership Practices And Their Role In Improving Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) Among Staff In Higher Education Institutions (Heis)

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Abstract

Introduction: *Inclusive leadership emphasizes openness, fairness, and recognition, fostering psychological safety and engagement among employees. In HEIs, it is increasingly linked to fostering Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) essential for institutional success.*

Objectives: *This study aims to (i) examine inclusive leadership practices in HEIs, (ii) analyze their impact on faculty IWB, and (iii) explore the relationship between demographic variables and perceptions of inclusive leadership.*

Research Design: *The study adopts an exploratory and descriptive design to test the Inclusive leadership model namely Link Assessment Model . The study used the data collected through structured questionnaires administered to faculty members across Indian HEIs. Hypotheses were tested to assess demographic variations.*

Findings: *Significant differences emerged based on gender and experience levels in perceptions of inclusive leadership. Notably, inclusive practices have positive correlation with IWB across teaching staff.*

Practical Implications: *HEIs should institutionalize inclusive leadership training, emphasizing recognition, collaboration, and innovation. Tailoring leadership strategies to diverse demographic profiles can strengthen innovation capacity and teaching effectiveness.*

Keywords: *Inclusive leadership, Innovation, work behavior, Higher education, IWB, HEIs.*

I.INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is a term prominently featured in the UN Millennium Development Goals, reflecting a global commitment to equity and participation (United Nations, 2000)(United Nations, 2015). Inclusiveness as a concept is also deeply rooted in cultural traditions, as seen in Chinese proverbs such as "All rivers run into the sea" and "Wide hearts embrace all," symbolizing openness and acceptance (Zhang & Xu, 2011). In management literature, inclusion is defined as a sense of belonging and psychological safety within a team, enabling individuals to contribute meaningfully (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2011)(Nishii, 2013). The concept behind inclusive leadership emerged primarily in Western contexts, built on the foundations of democracy along with justice (Pless & Maak, 2004)(Ryan, 2006). In the field of management, inclusive leadership was first formally proposed by Nembhard (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), who emphasized the importance of leader–employee interaction to promote contribution. Inclusive leadership is marked by open, accessible, and effective communication between leaders and subordinates (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010)(Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon, & Tayyeb, 2017). In Chinese culture, inclusiveness is all about "tolerance and greatness" of the moral cultivation (Tang, Zhang, & Li, 2014). Subsequently, after Nembhard (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), Shore

et al. (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2011) defined inclusive leadership as a dynamic, shared relationship built around a common vision and interdependence, emphasizing the role of followers. Hollander (Hollander, 2009) described an inclusive leader as someone who values contributions from all organizational levels and holds responsibility for outcomes. Inclusive leadership is thus essential to building inclusive organizations.

This paper studies inclusive practices in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their role in improving innovation among faculty. For clarity, we adopt the definition of inclusive leadership from Randel et al. (Randel, Dean, Ehrhart, Chung, & Shore, 2018), who define it as a leadership style where leaders demonstrate inclusion-related skills to create a workplace climate that meets employees' needs for belonging and uniqueness, thus fostering innovation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive leadership refers to leadership behaviors that value diversity, promote fairness, and create environments where individuals feel respected and engaged (Pless & Maak, 2004). Pless and Maak introduced the concept of inclusion competencies—traits that help individuals navigate diverse workplaces effectively (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). These competencies align with relational leadership, which emphasizes leader–employee interactions as central to organizational success (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2011).

Shore et al. (Nishii, 2013) proposed that the inclusive leadership, inclusive practices, and inclusive climate collectively shape employees' perception of inclusion. In such climates, relationship conflicts decrease, especially across gender and social lines, enhancing collaboration and critical thinking (Randel, Dean, Ehrhart, Chung, & Shore, 2018). Inclusive leaders are accessible, attentive, and fair, recognizing each employee's uniqueness while fostering a sense of belonging (Fang, Chen, Wang, & Chen, 2019). Fang et al. (Liu, 2017) suggest that inclusive leadership combines traits from both transformational and transactional leadership models, focusing on relationship-building and results. Liu (Tang, Zhang, & Li, 2014) emphasizes that inclusive leaders are people-oriented and engage subordinates in open dialogue. Tang et al. (Huang, Lin, Wu, & Yu, 2015) further describe inclusion as the perception of being acknowledged as a distinct and valuable member of an organization.Huang et al. (Shakil & Mahmood, 2021) found that inclusive leadership positively affects employee performance, especially when reinforced by psychological empowerment and trust. Although leadership studies are extensive, direct research linking inclusive leadership and innovative work behaviour (IWB) remains limited (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory provides a useful framework for understanding inclusive leadership. It posits that mutual respect and support between leaders and subordinates encourage reciprocal commitment and effort (Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon, & Tayyeb, 2017). In inclusive environments, employees are empowered to contribute ideas, participate in decision-making, and take initiative in innovation (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

Nembhard and Edmondson (Ryan, 2006) argue that inclusive leaders shape psychological safety—essential for innovation—by encouraging open communication, recognizing diverse perspectives, and fostering a climate of mutual respect. These leaders model behaviors such as empathy, tolerance, and active listening, which cultivate trust and collaboration (Pless & Maak, 2004). Leadership in higher education contexts increasingly requires inclusive practices that engage faculty, staff, and students across hierarchical and functional boundaries. Ryan (Blasé & Anderson, 1995) notes that while many studies address inclusion in education, few adopt the specific terminology of "inclusive leadership." Instead, related frameworks such as shared governance or teacher leadership are often used (Burbules, 1993). Inclusive leadership thus involves more than interpersonal traits; it is a structured, ethical, and collaborative approach to guiding institutions. It promotes equity, encourages innovation, and aligns organizational goals with the needs of a diverse academic community (United Nations, 2000).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To evaluate various inclusive leadership practices and innovative practices of HEIs
- To describe the importance of inclusive leadership fundamentals on IWB among faculty members of HEIs.
- To explore the significant relationship between the demographic fundamentals and among the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

III.RESEARCH DESGIN

Exploratory Research Study is applied using an Inclusive Assessment model to explore the significant relationship between demographics and the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) using statistical hypothesis testing with the help of ANOVA TEST. Descriptive Research Design is applied to conceptualize the role of innovative work behaviour (IWB) needed for the staff to perform efficiently. Data on the fundamentals of Inclusive leadership was collected through administering questionnaires to around 200 Faculty members of HEIs of India. The sample used was non-random.

IV.RESEARCH HYPOTHESES:

H01: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of male and female respondents towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

H02: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of respondents based on their total experience in teaching towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

H03: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of respondents based on their experience in the present institution towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

V. DISCUSSION

Inclusive leadership has gained prominence as a relational approach that fosters psychological safety and drives innovation (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2011)(Blau, 1964). According to social exchange theory, inclusive practices enhance employee engagement through mutual respect and support (Nishii, 2013)(Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Leaders who recognize the uniqueness of their subordinates, promote open communication, and build supportive relationships can significantly influence IWB (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010)(Morrow, 2015). The Linkage Inclusive Leadership Model identifies three core areas: leading self (recognizing individual strengths), leading relationships (fostering development through support), and leading culture (creating an inclusive organizational climate) (Hollander, 2009). These practices empower staff to contribute ideas, challenge norms, and implement solutions. Inclusive leadership thus redefines authority as a shared process built on trust and empathy (Ryan, 2006). Such leadership does not reside in individual traits but emerges from collaborative, communicative practices that value diversity and promote collective innovation (Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon, & Tayyeb, 2017). Leaders who exhibit inclusive behaviors help embed innovation into institutional culture, encouraging faculty to engage in idea generation, promotion, and implementation (Janssen, 2000).

Inclusive leadership has gained recognition in recent years, though its conceptualization varies across research (Choi, Tran, & Park, 2015). Social exchange theory offers a foundational explanation: inclusive leaders foster mutual support and trust, prompting employees to reciprocate with enhanced performance (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006)(Randel, Dean, Ehrhart, Chung, & Shore, 2018). Inclusive leaders influence psychological safety and engagement through their words and actions. These leaders demonstrate measurable behaviors—open communication, equal recognition, and valuing diversity—which create inclusive environments (Morrow, 2015)(Fang, Chen, Wang, & Chen, 2019). In such settings, employees are empowered to share ideas, participate in decision-making, and innovate collaboratively (Pless & Maak, 2004).

With a growing global emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), organizations increasingly adopt structured models to develop inclusive leadership. One such model, the Linkage Inclusive Leadership Assessment Model (Figure 1), as developed by Morrow (Hollander, 2009), highlights three pillars:

- **Leading Self** – Recognizing individual strengths and uniqueness to inspire innovation.
- **Leading Relationships** – Fostering broad networks and acknowledging others to build confidence and capability.
- **Leading Culture** – Promoting a psychologically safe environment where differences are respected and leveraged.

Figure 1: Link Assessment Model

A central question remains: Is inclusive leadership innate or developed? Research suggests it is nurtured through deliberate processes and institutional benchmarks (Burbules, 1993). Sustainable inclusion stems not from individual traits, but from equitable, participatory systems where all voices are valued (Hu, Wu, & Gu, 2017). Effective inclusive leaders demonstrate communication virtues such as openness, patience, and humility (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). They are consistently present, empathetic, and respectful of employee uniqueness, fostering innovation through shared knowledge and a strong sense of belonging (Blau, 1964)(Fang, Chen, Wang, & Chen, 2019).

A. INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION

In today's global and technologically advanced economy, innovation is a crucial driver of organizational growth and sustainability (Afsar & Badir, 2016). Leaders worldwide recognize the pivotal role of innovation in achieving long-term success. As employee innovation is central to this effort, leadership approaches that foster innovative work behaviour (IWB) have become essential (Janssen, 2000)(De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010).

Inclusive leadership differs from traditional, top-down models by fostering collaborative environments that empower employees to engage with complex challenges (Villaluz & Hechanova, 2018). Research suggests that inclusive leadership enhances job autonomy—a key factor promoting IWB (Blau, 1964)(De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Values such as trust, humility, empathy, and gratitude enable leaders to connect meaningfully with staff, fostering motivation and engagement (Ryan, 2006)(Lee & Wong, 2017). Inclusive leaders also cultivate fairness, ensuring balanced input and recognition for all employees (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). This environment supports innovation beyond R&D departments, encouraging all employees to generate, promote, and realize new ideas (Kessel, Hannemann-Weber, & Kratzer, 2012). As noted, IWB is shaped through discretionary behavior driven by employee competencies in response to a volatile business landscape (Messmann & Mulder, 2012).

Originally conceptualized by Janssen (Lambriex-Schmitz et al., 2020), IWB involves a three-phase process—idea generation, promotion, and realization. Its application in education contexts is expanding, yet existing measurement tools often fall short in capturing its multidimensionality (Messick, 1995). Several studies point to limited construct validity and underrepresented dimensions, with the "idea realization" phase particularly weak and the sustainability dimension often overlooked (Messick, 1995)(Shakil, 2021).

To address this, our study developed a multi-dimensional IWB instrument tailored for HEI faculty, adding a sustainability dimension and testing its validity. Findings reinforce the view that IWB is non-routine behavior that challenges traditional norms—potentially clashing with non-inclusive leaders who may view innovation as disruption (Messmann & Mulder, 2012). Inclusive leadership mitigates such conflict by providing psychological safety, encouraging open dialogue, and valuing diverse viewpoints (Nishii, 2013)(Ryan, 2006). As Shakil et al. emphasize (Blasé & Anderson, 1995), such leadership empowers employees to innovate. Specifically, inclusive leadership entails tolerance of failures, fair treatment, and appreciation of contributions—elements strongly linked to IWB (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010)(Blasé & Anderson, 1995). Ultimately, inclusive leadership nurtures IWB through internal motivation, autonomy, communication, and a shared sense of belonging (United Nations, 2000). These qualities not only stimulate innovation but inspire employees to become role models of creative and collaborative behavior in their organizations (Ryan, 2006).

B. THE ROLE OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP ON INNOVATION CAPABILITY IN HEIS

Though extensive literature explores leadership in inclusive educational settings, few directly use the term "inclusive leadership." Instead, terms like teacher leadership, shared governance, and participative leadership are

more commonly employed (Bourke, 2016). Inclusive leadership in education emphasizes involving diverse stakeholders—administrators, faculty, students, and communities—in governance aligned with equity and justice (Morrow, 2015)(Bourke, 2016).

Meaningful inclusive leadership must focus on both inclusive processes and equitable outcomes (Hollander, 2009)(Hu, Wu, & Gu, 2017). The literature outlines how leadership can be organized to support inclusion and offers practical steps for implementation (Kovač, Mühlbacher, & Kodydek, 2012). Practitioners must:

- Treat leadership as a shared, collective process;
- Include staff, students, and parents in institutional decisions;
- Advocate for marginalized groups;
- Foster institutional awareness and education;
- Develop critical thinking across the community;
- Encourage brainstorming and collaborative problem-solving;
- Center learning on inclusive engagement;
- Use equitable decision-making;
- Promote whole-institution approaches to inclusion.

An inclusive leader integrates personal values—such as trust, empathy, and humility—into their leadership style (Randel, Dean, Ehrhart, Chung, & Shore, 2018). Such leaders create environments that support diversity and innovation (Blau, 1964)(Janssen, 2000).

Inclusive leadership assessments, such as the model prescribed by Charley Morrow at Linkage, break innovation into four stages: opportunity recognition, idea generation, promotion, and realization (Hollander, 2009). This iterative process highlights how inclusive practices foster innovation. Combining intellect and emotional intelligence, inclusive leaders inspire innovation aligned with organizational goals (Lee & Wong, 2017). They motivate teams, coordinate across levels, and encourage risk-taking without fear (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010)(McMillan, 2010). Effective leaders also align employees with a compelling vision, guiding them through change and collaborative action (Ref60). Ultimately, inclusive leaders inspire creativity, recognize contributions, and promote continuous learning—key drivers of innovation in today's dynamic educational and organizational landscapes (Ref60).

VII. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION:

In the part of analyzing the primary data collected through a questionnaire reflecting three major fundamentals of inclusive leadership viz., leading self, leading relationships, and leading culture in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with respect to the three select demographic variables namely respondents' gender, total teaching experience and experience in the present institution. To test the hypothesis H01, the statistical technique t-test for independent samples is applied to measure the significant differences between the perceptions of male and female respondents towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership. To test the hypothesis H02 and H03 ANOVA one-way classification is applied to test the significant differences between the respondents based on their total teaching experience and in present institution towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

H01: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of male and female respondents towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

Table 1: Independent Samples Test									
			Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
			F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Leading Self (LS)	LS.1	Equal variances assumed	11.547	0.001	-2.195	122	0.03	-0.428	0.195
		Equal variances			-2.225	117.957	0.028	-0.428	0.192

		not assumed						
	LS.2	Equal variances assumed	0.132	0.717	-1.132	122	0.26	-0.217	0.192
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.127	117.464	0.262	-0.217	0.193
	LS.3	Equal variances assumed	0.214	0.645	-1.387	122	0.168	-0.259	0.187
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.381	117.765	0.17	-0.259	0.188
Leading Relationships (LR)	LR.1	Equal variances assumed	6.987	0.009	-2.87	122	0.005	-0.607	0.211
		Equal variances not assumed			-2.921	113.678	0.004	-0.607	0.208
	LR.2	Equal variances assumed	3.872	0.051	-1.864	122	0.065	-0.419	0.225
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.882	120.638	0.062	-0.419	0.223
	LR.3	Equal variances assumed	9.932	0.002	-3.897	122	0	-0.713	0.183
		Equal variances not assumed			-3.965	114.087	0	-0.713	0.18
Leading Culture (LC)	LC.1	Equal variances assumed	0.476	0.491	1.152	122	0.252	0.256	0.223
		Equal variances not assumed			1.147	118.412	0.254	0.256	0.223
	LC.2	Equal variances assumed	0.068	0.795	-1.064	122	0.29	-0.255	0.24
		Equal variances not assumed			-1.066	121.613	0.289	-0.255	0.239

		Equal variances assumed	1.618	0.206	-2.278	122	0.024	-0.502	0.22
	LC.3	Equal variances not assumed	1.618	0.206	-2.287	121.977	0.024	-0.502	0.219

From the Table 1, it was observed that the p-significant value is less than 0.05 for the fundamentals "leading self" and "leading relationships". This means there exists significant differences between the male and female respondents towards the statement-1 of the factor "leading self" and the statements 1 and 3 of the factor "leading relationships". Hence, we reject the null hypothesis according to Levene's test and it can be interpreted that there exists significant differences between the male and female respondents about the fundamentals of inclusive leadership.

H02: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of respondents based on their total experience towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

Table 2: ANOVA

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Leading Self	LS.1	Between Groups	42.428	5	8.486	9.378	0.000
		Within Groups	106.766	118	0.905		
		Total	149.194	123			
	LS.2	Between Groups	35.443	5	7.089	7.973	0.000
		Within Groups	104.904	118	0.889		
		Total	140.347	123			
	LS.3	Between Groups	23.998	5	4.8	5.159	0.000
		Within Groups	109.776	118	0.93		
		Total	133.774	123			
Leading Relationships	LR.1	Between Groups	56.43	5	11.286	10.78	0.000
		Within Groups	123.594	118	1.047		
		Total	180.024	123			
	LR.2	Between Groups	38.652	5	7.73	5.798	0.000
		Within Groups	157.316	118	1.333		
		Total	195.968	123			
	LR.3	Between Groups	38.168	5	7.634	8.678	0.000
		Within Groups	103.8	118	0.88		
		Total	141.968	123			
Leading Culture	LC.1	Between Groups	26.784	5	5.357	3.898	0.003
		Within Groups	162.143	118	1.374		
		Total	188.927	123			
	LC.2	Between Groups	57.296	5	11.459	8.365	0.000
		Within Groups	161.64	118	1.37		
		Total	218.935	123			
	LC.3	Between Groups	28.211	5	5.642	4.096	0.002
		Within Groups	162.563	118	1.378		
		Total	190.774	123			

From the Table 2, the p-significant values of all the three fundamentals of inclusive leadership states that the null hypothesis can be rejected and there exist significant differences between their perceptions on the role of inclusive leadership.

H03: There exists no significant differences between the perceptions of respondents based on their experience in the present institution towards the fundamentals of inclusive leadership in HEIs.

Table 3: ANOVA			Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Leading Self	LS.1	Between Groups	24.823	4	6.206	5.938	0.000
		Within Groups	124.371	119	1.045		
		Total	149.194	123			
	LS.2	Between Groups	13.793	4	3.448	3.243	0.015
		Within Groups	126.553	119	1.063		
		Total	140.347	123			
	LS.3	Between Groups	32.297	4	8.074	9.468	0.000
		Within Groups	101.477	119	0.853		
		Total	133.774	123			
Leading Relationships	LR.1	Between Groups	22.186	4	5.546	4.182	0.003
		Within Groups	157.838	119	1.326		
		Total	180.024	123			
	LR.2	Between Groups	27.355	4	6.839	4.827	0.001
		Within Groups	168.612	119	1.417		
		Total	195.968	123			
	LR.3	Between Groups	6.74	4	1.685	1.483	**0.212**
		Within Groups	135.228	119	1.136		
		Total	141.968	123			
Leading Culture	LC.1	Between Groups	17.822	4	4.455	3.099	0.018
		Within Groups	171.106	119	1.438		
		Total	188.927	123			
	LC.2	Between Groups	42.177	4	10.544	7.099	0.000
		Within Groups	176.759	119	1.485		
		Total	218.935	123			
	LC.3	Between Groups	42.765	4	10.691	8.596	0.000
		Within Groups	148.01	119	1.244		
		Total	190.774	123			

From the Table 3, it is found that there exist no significant differences between the statement-3 of inclusive leadership factor "Leading Relationships", hence we accept the null hypotheses. For the remaining inclusive leadership fundamentals, the p-significant value is found to be less than 005 and can be clearly said that there

exist significant differences between the perceptions of respondents based on their teaching experience in the present institution.

As can be seen from the above results, it is found that gender differences exist between male faculty members and female faculty members with respect to the courageous nature, expressive nature of leaders and facilitating development in HEIs, where female faculty members are positive about it. But it is found that the faculty members with experience of ten and above are positive about the inclusiveness and innovation in the HEIs, whereas the new faculty members perceptions are just the opposite. Under the third category of study on the differences in the opinion of faculty members based on their experience in the present institution, it is found that the new faculty members are positive except in the building relationship factor of 'Leading Relationship' compared to the experienced ones.

CONCLUSION

In HEIs, where dynamic learning and adaptability are critical, inclusive leadership is vital to cultivating innovative work behaviour. Our findings confirm that inclusive leadership enhances IWB by creating a culture of openness, fairness, and recognition. Gender and experience influence perceptions of inclusiveness, with experienced and newer faculty members expressing different levels of engagement. Institutions must train leaders to embrace inclusive practices and establish policies that value all voices. An inclusive approach not only strengthens faculty commitment but also aligns institutional strategies with innovation and sustainability. Fostering inclusive leadership is thus essential for transforming HEIs into hubs of creativity and educational excellence.

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