Inclusive leadership: Realizing positive outcomes through belongingness and being valued for uniqueness

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ABSTRACT

We introduce a theoretically-grounded conceptualization of inclusive leadership and present a framework for understanding factors that contribute to and follow from inclusive leadership within work groups. We conceptualize inclusive leadership as a set of positive leader behaviors that facilitate group members perceiving belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness within the group as they fully contribute to group processes and outcomes. We propose that leader pro-diversity beliefs, humility, and cognitive complexity increase the propensity of inclusive leader behaviors. We identify five categories of inclusive leadership behaviors that facilitate group members’ perceptions of inclusion, which in turn lead to member work group identification, psychological empowerment, and behavioral outcomes (creativity, job performance, and reduced turnover) in the pursuit of group goals. This framework provides theoretical grounding for the construct of inclusive leadership while advancing our understanding of how leaders can increase diverse work group effectiveness.

Diversity is thought of by many CEOs and business leaders to be a strategic priority that provides important contributions, including increased levels of creativity and innovation (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013). Although many organizations have added more diversity to their workforce, there has been increasing recognition that focusing on increasing diversity in organizations does not ensure the potential benefits or the retention and/or promotion of individuals from these groups to influential positions in organizations (Cook & Glass, 2014; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2008). Unfortunately, efforts to recruit, develop, and promote individuals from underrepresented groups do not guarantee that these individuals’ abilities are fully utilized or that their voices and perspectives are fully heard and incorporated in organizational decisions in an advantageous manner. In many cases, managers may wonder why they worked to achieve diversity when they do not ultimately see an improvement in the performance of their teams and might be prone to feel that they have let down individuals for whom they sought to provide opportunities.

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In order to achieve more complete involvement of diverse individuals in the workplace and to provide the opportunity for all organizational members to reach their full potential, researchers and practitioners have increasingly looked to inclusion (employees perceiving that they are esteemed members of a work group or organization as a result of treatment that satisfies belongingness and uniqueness needs) as a route to accomplishing these goals (Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, & Singh, 2011). Although it is clear that experiencing inclusion in work groups holds promise, such experiences are dependent in part on effective leadership (Cottrill, Lopez, & Hoffman, 2014). Interestingly, while scholars have highlighted the leadership challenges associated with diversity in work groups (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004; DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996), there is still limited research and theory focusing on leadership approaches that can address these difficulties by promoting employee experiences of work group inclusion (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Leaders who promote employee inclusion not only hold the promise of offering value by retaining diverse employees, but they interact with employees in ways that go beyond mere avoidance of bias and discrimination (cf., Simons, Leroy, Veronek, & Masschelein, 2015).

We propose that inclusive leadership enables the effective functioning of diverse work groups in ways that are not sufficiently addressed by other forms of leadership. Building on optimal distinctiveness theory and social identity theory, we conceptualize inclusive leadership as a set of leader behaviors that are focused on facilitating group members feeling part of the group (belongingness) and retaining their sense of individuality (uniqueness) while contributing to group processes and outcomes (Brewer, 1991; Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, & Ehrhart, & Singh, G., 2011; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Richer, & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, inclusive leadership is beneficial for diverse teams through its focus on accepting women and minorities while simultaneously valuing all members for their unique attributes, perspectives, and contributions, ultimately leading to higher performance. While a number of existing leadership approaches have been established as effective, none has adequately addressed these fundamental needs of group members to belong and to be valued for uniqueness. Since belonging and being valued for uniqueness are fundamental human needs, inclusive leadership has the potential to be beneficial to diverse work groups while also being effective for more homogeneous work groups (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011).

Managers of work groups, and other individuals in formal leadership positions, are critical to creating inclusion since group members form perceptions of inclusion based on the treatment they receive at work (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Managers not only are responsible for many decisions that impact employees (e.g., resource allocation decisions and work task assignments), but they also hold a large degree of influence over the organizational environment in which inclusive treatment by others may occur (Nishii, 2013). For example, while Johnson & Johnson is a top-rated organization by DiversityInc. for its company-wide diversity practices, it is up to individual managers within Johnson & Johnson to play the key role of ensuring that all employees are fully included and engaged in the work being done in the various groups within the organization (DiversityInc., 2017). While it has been recognized in the literature that managers and other formal leaders can behave in ways that are more or less inclusive (e.g., Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Prime & Salib, 2014), much work remains to be done to advance theory related to our understanding of inclusive leadership.

Below we review previous work that has explored inclusiveness related to leadership. We present our conceptualization of inclusive leadership and illustrate how it builds on and adds to existing forms of leadership. We then propose a theoretical framework (see Fig. 1 below) in which individual differences (i.e., pro-diversity beliefs, humility, and cognitive complexity) contribute to inclusive leadership behaviors that facilitate group members’ perceptions of inclusion, which in turn contribute to group members’ work group identification and psychological empowerment and to behavioral outcomes.

Our framework makes several theoretical contributions to the literature. First, we provide a theoretically grounded model of inclusive leadership and propose directions for future research in an area of leadership research that has been gaining popularity without a clear theoretical foundation. Second, we provide theoretical distinctions between inclusive leadership and other forms of leadership both in terms of defining inclusive leadership and grounding our framework in a theory that is distinct from prior leadership theory. Finally, we contribute to theory on diversity and social identity by offering propositions that explain how diverse work groups can be led effectively, and by highlighting ways in which social identity theory can be augmented to realize positive outcomes within diverse work groups.

We limit our theorizing to the experiences of individuals within a work group and managers with formal leadership responsibilities over the work group, as inclusion research has tended to focus on the experience of inclusion within groups (e.g., Nishii, 2013; Nishii & Mayer, 2009). However, we acknowledge that inclusive leadership is likely relevant to other levels of the organization and to

![Fig. 1. Theoretical model of inclusive leadership.](image-url)
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