**The importance of inclusive leadership to facilitate employees’ inclusive behaviors and inclusion experiences**

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Research that examined the effects of workforce diversity in organizations derived at the shared belief that solely focusing on increasing diversity of employees (e.g. in terms of gender or nationality) does not result in the desired outcomes, such as high performance and well-being of employees. Instead, researchers have pointed out that inclusion, the experience of employees to belong and be valued for their unique contribution (Shore et al., 2011), is necessary for teams to share and ultimately make use of the different perspectives and backgrounds (e. g. Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998; Nishii, 2013; Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). Inclusion is thought to enable teams to generate improved outcomes. Conclusively, organizations that aim to increase workforce diversity simultaneously need to foster an inclusive climate (Mor Barak et al., 2016). Research points out that inclusive practices contribute to an organization that offers equal opportunities for both, members of minority and majority groups. They encourage minority employees to participate while they simultaneously provide opportunities to majority employees. Overall, inclusive practices support employees to be fully engaged throughout all levels of the organization and to be their authentic selves (Shore et al., 2018). Despite these conceptualizations, knowledge regarding concrete procedures to create an inclusive climate are largely unknown and not easy for an organization to realize. Nevertheless, researchers commonly argue that leaders play a key role as important facilitator to create an inclusive climate (Nishii, 2013; Randel et al., 2018). Inclusive leadership is conceptualized as a set of “leader behaviors that respond to group members' needs for belongingness and uniqueness within a work group” (Randel et al., 2018, p.192).

In general, leaders are recognized as important creators of an organization’s work climate (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013; Gilbert, De Winne, & Sels, 2015). Multiple ways can be identified through which leaders influence the work climate. First, leaders influence employees’ behaviors that in return shape an organization’s work climate. Based on the rational of behavioral contagion theory (Wheeler, 1966) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) leaders function as role models and employees are likely to imitate their behaviors. Inclusive leadership entails a set of behaviors that encourage openness, accessibility, and availability of a leaders (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). Inclusive leaders are therefore open, listen and respond to employees’ opinions, value their contributions, and share their visions with employees. Moreover, inclusive leadership has been identified to facilitate employees’ well-being and their willingness to perform beyond the formal requirements of the organization. We thus, expect employees to on the one hand imitate the inclusive behaviors shown by their leaders and on the other hand be willing to engage in pro-social behaviors that go beyond their task descriptions because. The latter is reasoned by the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) that points out that employees feel a sense of reciprocity since their well-being is supported. Inclusive leadership thus triggers a feeling of obligation to also behave in a pro-social manner and give something back to the organization, the leader, and the work team.

A second way through which leaders influence the work climate to be more inclusive lies in the nature of inclusive leadership itself and its effects. Overall, research suggests that behaviors that foster openness, care and concern for others enable high-quality relationships among employees (Ferdman & Deane, 2014). Employees that engage in behaviors that increase the work resources, such as exchanging knowledge, providing information, seeking advice and feedback, will therefore have potential to contribute to a more inclusive organization (Ferdman & Deane, 2014). These environments offer a social context in which employees feel safe to voice concerns, share perspectives, or contribute their inputs (Shore et al., 2018), which in return makes employees feel engaged and enables them to use the resources to derive at improved solutions (Mor Barak et al., 2016).

We believe that inclusive leadership and employee behaviors that foster inclusion experiences are essential to create an inclusive climate. The present study therefore tests, in the low diversity environment to what extent inclusive leadership has the potential to stimulate employees’ behaviors (i.e. inclusive behavior) and how these further relate to experiences of inclusion, as well as employee engagement and performance. Overall, we expect employee inclusive behavior to mediate the positive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee experience of inclusion, work engagement, and performance. We address a crucial and in research underrepresented aspect, by focusing on the joint effects of leader and employees behaviors to foster inclusion. We use dyadic data from employee- leader pairs, which has not been done to our knowledge in the diversity and inclusion research. Additionally, we contribute to the leadership research by providing empirical insight into the influence of inclusive leadership on employee behavior, work engagement, performance, and inclusion experience.

Data collection for this study is not finalized yet (we plan to end data collection in the end of April 2021). The proposed relationships are preliminary tested among a sub-sample of 54 employee- leader dyads. Preliminary analyses were performed using PROCESS macro of Hayes (2018). Results showed that inclusive leadership, which was rated by their employee, indeed stimulated employees to display inclusive behaviors towards colleagues (B = .27, SE = .10, p < .05). Next to that, inclusive leadership showed a direct effect on employee performance (rated by leaders) (B = .36, SE = .09, p < .01) and employees’ experience of inclusion (B = .18, SE = .09, p < .05) but not on employee work engagement (B = .05, SE = .08, p = .58). Inclusive behaviors of employees mediated the relationships between inclusive leadership and inclusion experience of employees (B = .07, SE = .05, 95% CI = .00, .19) as well as between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement (B = 18, SE = .08, 95% CI = .05, .37) (indirect effect). Inclusive behaviors of the employee did not mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance (B = .01, SE = .04, 95% CI = -.06, .10).

Overall, we conclude that both leaders’ and employees’ inclusive behaviors play a crucial role in facilitating inclusion in organizations with low but rising diversity. Leadership did not directly relate to employee work engagement but stimulated employees’ inclusive behavior that further enhanced work engagement. This underlines the importance of investigating the joint impact of leader and employee behaviors. Furthermore, inclusive leadership had a positive relation to employee performance, but employees’ inclusive behaviors were not significantly related to performance of employees. Further investigations are needed to examine the relationships and possible moderating effects of contextual factors. Next, inclusive leadership was positively related to inclusive behavior of employees, which marks the crucial role of leaders to act as role model and share values and norms that create an inclusive organization. Finally, both inclusive leadership and inclusive behaviors of employees were positively related to the inclusion experiences of employees. Conclusively, we believe that by encouraging leaders and employees (e.g. through trainings) to embrace differences of colleagues and give them the tools at hand to make others feel belonging and valued for their authenticity, organizations can develop a true climate of inclusion in which barriers for women and other minority employees are decreased.

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