

# Inclusive Leadership for Employee Workplace Well-Being in Public Organizations

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**Abstract:** Various public organizations realize that promoting workplace well-being is crucial for the effectiveness of their employees. It is believed that when creating an environment where employees feel welcomed, are treated fairly, and their contributions are appreciated, they will be happy and work better. Therefore, diversity management has gained increased attention. However, since diversity does not necessarily mean inclusion in decision-making and the appreciation of employee differences and input, a growing body of research has advocated the adoption of positive relational leadership styles, such as inclusive leadership. Inclusive leadership embraces employee differences, manages diversity, and recognizes employee input. Hence this paper investigates how inclusive leadership correlates to employee workplace well-being in public organizations. Relying on quantitative analysis, a questionnaire was distributed to N= 234 Egyptian local government officials who demonstrated diversity in gender and educational levels. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS version 20. The study's conclusions reveal that inclusive leadership has an uneven influence on employee workplace well-being based on educational levels. The correlation was strongest among the least educated and weakest among the highly educated. Gender, on the other hand, did not show any significant difference in the correlation between inclusive leadership and workplace well-being and hence, was not considered for further analysis. Moreover, the traits of inclusive leadership have different effects on employee workplace well-being based on their educational levels. For the least educated, leadership accessibility had the greatest influence on employee workplace well-being, while for the highly educated, leadership openness had the strongest influence. In conclusion, this paper highlights the importance of inclusive leadership in promoting employee workplace well-being in public organizations, especially for marginalized groups who may feel excluded in the workplace. Additionally, public organizations should recognize that inclusive leadership practices should be tailored to meet the diverse needs of employees based on their educational levels.

**Keywords:** Inclusive leadership, Workplace well-being, Availability, Accessibility, Openness

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing interest among public organizations in managing diversity and caring for employees' well-being (Ashikali et al, 2021; Cheung, 2016; de Souza and Gama, 2020; Gallegos, 2014; Pawar, 2016; Pradhan and Hati, 2019; Sung, 2021). The belief is that when employees are treated fairly, and their contributions are appreciated, they will be more effective. Nonetheless, research on diversity has produced mixed results (Li, 2021). One stream of studies highlights how diversity encourages creativity and innovation, while another demonstrates that diversity can lead to interpersonal conflict and reduced social cohesion (Mendelsohn, 2021). Additionally, diversity without inclusion is ineffective (Cohen, 2022).

Thus, positive relational leadership styles were emphasized. Based on empirical research, inclusive leadership embraces employee differences, manages diversity, and recognizes employee input (Mor Barak, 2015), especially among marginalized groups (Shore and Chung, 2022). Hence, this paper raises the question: to what extent is inclusive leadership in public organizations correlated to employee well-being?

The importance of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it focuses on a stream of literature that supports the adoption of positive relational leadership styles, such as inclusive leadership, in public organizations and outlines its benefits for employees. Secondly, this paper seeks to offer an in-depth analysis of how inclusive leadership correlates to employee workplace well-being. Lastly, this study examines whether all employees, regardless of their differences, will equally feel supported.

## 2. Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership is defined as the words and actions that a leader uses to appreciate and encourage others' contributions (Buskirk, 2020; Tran and Choi, 2019). It recognizes and values the differences among the employees, as well as encourages their full participation in the organization and decision-making (Cohen, 2022; Mor Barak, 2015). It listens to the employees' needs and expectations and supports their inputs and outputs (Bannay et al., 2020).

There are three important traits of inclusive leadership; availability, accessibility, and openness; that are widely used as sub-scales when measuring inclusive leadership (Ahmed et al, 2021; Buskirk, 2020; Choi et al, 2017; Jin

et al, 2017; Li, 2021; Zhao et al, 2020). *Availability* indicates the extent to which the leader is present to his employees. *Accessibility* is the extent to which the employees can reach the leader anytime. Whereas *openness* refers to the extent the leader encourages the employees to offer ideas and opinions (Sung, 2021). Hence, inclusive leadership creates a safe working environment for different opinions and perspectives while promoting justice based on a sense of uniqueness and belongingness (Cohen, 2022; Javed et al, 2019; Korkmaz et al, 2022; Mor Barak, 2015).

Numerous empirical studies have highlighted the positive outcomes of inclusive leadership. For individuals, inclusive leadership has a positive impact on employee commitment, performance, satisfaction (Sung, 2021; Xiaotao et al, 2018), psychological safety (Javed et al, 2019; Randel et al, 2018; Zhao et al, 2020), work engagement (Bao et al, 2022; Sprouse, 2021), retention and adaptive behavior (Qurraatulain et al, 2022), innovative work behavior (Javed et al, 2019; Mendelsohn, 2021; Zhong et al, 2022), and psychological well-being (Ahmed et al, 2021). For groups, inclusive leadership has a positive influence on collective voice behavior (Chen et al, 2021; Jolly and Lee, 2021), and team performance (Buskirk, 2020; Jolly and Lee, 2021; Ye et al, 2019). For organizations, inclusive leadership has a positive correlation with organizational citizenship behavior (Tran and Choi, 2019; Younas et al, 2021), and organizational commitment (Buskirk, 2020; Mendelsohn, 2021).

Nevertheless, little empirical research suggests that inclusive leadership might encourage prosocial rule-breaking (Wang and Shi, 2021) and confusion when diversity is not well managed (Minehart et al, 2020). Moreover, Xiaotao et al (2018) assume that the positive outcomes of inclusive leadership take a curvilinear shape where high levels of inclusive leadership encourage the employees to contribute less to the organization as the risk of being excluded becomes lower.

### **3. Employee Well-Being: Components and Outcomes**

Well-being, in general, indicates that an individual is satisfied and content with his life (Okafor, 2019) and that his spiritual, emotional, and work lives are balanced (Boddy et al, 2021). Most of the literature mentions three main components of employee well-being (Okafor, 2019): 1- subjective well-being, which refers to a positive feeling about one's own life (life satisfaction) (Cheung, 2016; Zhong et al, 2020), 2- workplace well-being which reflects satisfaction at work and work-related affect (work satisfaction) (Xanthopoulou et al, 2012), and 3- psychological well-being, which denotes having a sense of self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, meaningfulness, and positive interpersonal relations (Herb, 2015; Luu, 2019; Pawar, 2016; Pradhan and Hati, 2019). These components are independent and can be harmonious or contradictory. Therefore, they are treated independently as an employee may score high on all or only one or more of these components (Herb, 2015).

This study focuses on workplace well-being. Various organizations have been increasingly interested in fostering employee workplace well-being due to its diverse benefits (Cheung, 2016). At the individual level, employee workplace well-being is positively related to individual performance (Boddy et al, 2021; Page and Vella-Brodrick, 2009), job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment (Pradhan and Hati, 2019; Zhong et al, 2020), happiness, organizational citizenship (Okafor, 2019; Pawar, 2016), and is negatively related to turnover intentions (Boddy et al, 2021). Whereas at the organizational level, employee workplace well-being is positively related to increased organizational performance and productivity as well as negatively related to turnover rates (von Thiele Schwarz and Lornudd, 2021).

### **4. Employee Workplace Well-Being and Inclusive Leadership**

Inclusive leadership is one of the antecedents that has a direct influence on employee satisfaction (Bish, 2021; Boddy et al, 2021; Kelloway et al, 2013; Samad et al, 2022). It emphasizes uniqueness and belongingness, encouraging the employees to express their distinct opinions and skills while simultaneously identifying themselves with the organization (Korkmaz et al, 2022; Roberson and Perry, 2021). It creates a safe working environment where everyone feels comfortable speaking up, especially marginalized groups (Ahmed et al, 2021; Buskirk, 2020). Stocker et al (2014) and Wieneke et al (2019) demonstrate that employee workplace well-being increases when the leader praises, supports, and recognizes the efforts of the employees. Therefore, this paper assumes that:

*H1: Inclusive leadership is positively correlated to employee workplace well-being.*

There are three basic traits of inclusive leadership. Leadership availability indicates that leadership is present and supportive of the employees (Korkmaz et al, 2022), cares about their needs, and offers guidance (Wang and Shi, 2021; Wuffli, 2016). Inclusive leadership is not only present at the professional level but is also present at the emotional level to build trust and cohesion, as well as foster extra-proactive behavior (Zhao et al, 2020). As

a result, inclusive leadership builds positive interpersonal relationships with employees (Choi et al, 2017; Ye et al, 2019), and creates an organizational environment that encourages the employees to reciprocate and be committed (Buskirk, 2020; (Iqbal et al, 2019; Luu, 2019; Qurrahtulain et al, 2022; Xiaotao et al, 2018). Hence, this paper further proposes that:

*H2: Leadership availability is positively correlated to employee workplace well-being.*

A second trait is accessibility. It implies that employees can reach leadership anytime and regardless of their power status (Buskirk, 2020; Wang and Shi, 2021). It encourages all employees to speak up (Minehart et al, 2020; Wuffli, 2016). Therefore, it is important to marginalized groups (Booyesen, 2014; Jin et al, 2017; Liu, 2018; van Knippenberg and van Ginkel, 2021). Moreover, inclusive leadership ensures fairness and equity (Javed et al, 2021; Mendelsohn, 2021), tolerance (Gallegos, 2014), humbleness, mercy, and sympathy (Wuffli, 2016). As a result, inclusive leadership inspires positive emotions and makes the employees feel worthy (Qurrahtulain et al, 2022), and positively treated (Tran and Choi, 2019). Therefore, this paper suggests that:

*H3: Accessibility is positively correlated to employee workplace well-being.*

Finally, inclusive leadership stresses openness. In addition to encouraging discussion and respect (Wuffli, 2016), inclusive leadership welcomes employees' opinions and ideas (Ashikali et al, 2021; Bao et al, 2022; Buskirk, 2020; Mendelsohn, 2021), involves employees in the decision-making process (Qurrahtulain et al, 2022; Randel et al, 2018; van Knippenberg and van Ginkel, 2021; Younas et al, 2021), and promotes cohesion and collaboration (Choi et al, 2017; Jolly and Lee, 2021; Minehart et al, 2020), Therefore, inclusive leadership does not adopt a command-and-control approach (Ye et al, 2019). As a result, the employees feel empowered instead of embarrassed or rejected (Bao et al, 2022). Thus, this paper presupposes that:

*H4: Openness is positively correlated to employee workplace well-being.*

## 5. Methodology

To investigate the extent to which inclusive leadership is correlated to employee well-being in public organizations, a quantitative analysis was adopted by disseminating a questionnaire to N=264 local officials working in various local units in three Egyptian governorates. To avoid any ethical concerns, the respondents were randomly chosen - after getting their informed consent and assuring the anonymity of their identity - while undergoing formal training. Choosing local officials was seen as suitable for the study for two reasons. First, local officials present different facets of diversity like gender and different levels of education (high-school education, university education, and postgraduate education). Second, they face various challenges daily when trying to meet the endless demands of local citizens. These challenges may negatively impact their well-being. Hence, local officials were considered the best to evaluate whether inclusive leadership correlates to their well-being while focusing on their differences in gender and educational level.

The questionnaire included questions on employee well-being benefiting from scales used by Herb (2015); Okafor (2019); and Pradhan and Hati, (2019), as well as questions on inclusive leadership and its three components following the scales adopted by Buskirk (2020) and Mendelsohn (2021). The questionnaire was pilot-tested on a few local officials to check their understanding of the questions. Afterward, the responses were coded and statistically analyzed using the SPSS version 20 software.

## 6. Results

To investigate the extent to which inclusive leadership is correlated to employee well-being in public organizations, a questionnaire was disseminated to N=234 local officials of three Egyptian governorates. Table 1 demonstrates the basic demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1: Demographics**

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
<b>Job</b>	non-managerial	56	48	104
	managerial	68	62	130
<b>Experience</b>	< 1 year	2	0	2
	1 year till < 5 years	12	12	24

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
	5 years till < 10 years	26	36	62
	≥ 10 years	84	62	146
Educational level	School education	10	10	20
	Graduate	78	76	154
	Postgraduate	36	24	60
Total		124	110	234

To check the internal consistency of the responses regarding the three traits of inclusive leadership, a Cronbach analysis was conducted. It demonstrated a high level of inter-item reliability for availability of  $\alpha = 0.955$ , for accessibility of  $\alpha = 0.859$ , and for openness of  $\alpha = 0.865$ . As for employee well-being, Cronbach analysis also revealed a high level of inter-item reliability of  $\alpha = 0.812$ .

To check the extent the diverse respondents witness employee workplace well-being, the mean and standard deviation of the responses compared by gender and level of education were calculated. Despite men witnessing more workplace well-being ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ), than women ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ), this difference was insignificant ( $p = .76$ ). As a result, this paper ignored comparing further results based on gender.

Yet when the results were compared according to the level of education, they revealed that the respondents with high-school education witnessed more workplace well-being ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ), followed by the respondents with postgraduate education ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ), and finally the respondents with a university degree ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ), with a significant difference between respondents with high school education on one hand and respondents with postgraduate education and the respondents with university education on the other ( $p = .007$ ,  $p = .015$  respectively). However, there was an insignificant difference between the respondents with postgraduate education and respondents with university education ( $p = .69$ ). These results indicate the least educated witnessed more well-being than the rest of the respondents.

**The correlation between inclusive leadership and employee workplace well-being**

To investigate the correlation between inclusive leadership and well-being, Spearman’s rho analysis was conducted (see Table 2). It was found that inclusive leadership was significantly correlated with employee workplace well-being ( $r(233) = .500$ ,  $p < .01$ ), verifying thereby H1. Since there was no significant difference between the responses based on gender, it can be concluded that both women and men witness equally a significant correlation between inclusive leadership and employee workplace well-being.

**Table 2: Correlations between inclusive leadership and workplace well-being**

Well-being felt by respondents			Well-being	Inclusive leadership	availability	accessibility	openness
Spearman's rho	Workplace well-being (of all respondents)	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,500**	,402**	,493**	,382**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000	,000	,000
		N	234	234	234	234	234
	Of respondents with high-school education	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,713**	.	,598**	,332
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	.	,005	,153
		N	20	20	20	20	20
	Of respondents with a university education	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,549**	,462**	,532**	,417**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000	,000	,000	,000
		N	154	154	154	154	154

Well-being felt by respondents		Well-being	Inclusive leadership	availability	accessibility	openness
Of respondents with postgraduate education	Correlation Coefficient		,257*	,220	,263*	,827**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,048	,091	,042	,238
	N	60	60	60	60	60
. could not be calculated due to a constant						
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).						
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

As for how respondents with different educational levels might witness the correlations, Table 2 also reveals that based on Spearman’s rho analysis, the highest correlation between inclusive leadership and employee workplace well-being can be found among the respondents with high-school education ( $r(19) = .713, p < .01$ ), followed by the respondents with university education ( $r(153) = .549, p < .01$ ), and the respondents with postgraduate education ( $r(59) = .257, p < .05$ ), indicating that the strongest correlation was found among the least educated.

**The correlation between leadership availability and employee workplace well-being**

To offer further details on how inclusive leadership is correlated to employee workplace well-being, Spearman’s rho analysis was conducted on each trait of inclusive leadership to check how they are correlated to employee workplace well-being (see Table 2). With regards to the correlation between leadership availability and employee workplace well-being, Spearman’s rho analysis reveals a significant correlation for all the respondents ( $r(233) = .402, p < .01$ ), verifying thereby H2. This indicates that leadership availability contributes to employee workplace well-being for all the respondents. To check how the respondents with different educational levels witness this correlation, Spearman’s rho analysis reveals that only the respondents with university education (who also constitute the majority of the respondents) felt this correlation ( $r(153) = .462, p < .01$ ). These results indicate that for the majority of the respondents, leadership availability contributes to their workplace well-being.

**The correlation between leadership accessibility and employee workplace well-being**

With regards to the correlation between leadership accessibility and employee workplace well-being (see Table 2), Spearman’s rho analysis reveals a significant correlation for all the respondents ( $r(233) = .493, p < .01$ ), verifying thereby H3. To investigate how the respondents with different educational levels witness this correlation, Spearman’s rho analysis reveals the respondents with high-school education strongly witness this correlation ( $r(19) = .598, p < .01$ ), followed by the respondents with university education ( $r(153) = .532, p < .01$ ), and the respondents with postgraduate education ( $r(59) = .263, p < .05$ ). These results reveal that the respondents with high school education feel that inclusive leadership is accessible to them more than those respondents with a university education or postgraduate education.

**The correlation between leadership openness and employee workplace well-being**

Concerning the correlation between leadership openness and employee workplace well-being (see Table 2), Spearman’s rho analysis reveals a significant correlation for all the respondents ( $r(233) = .382, p < .01$ ), verifying thereby H4. As for how the respondents with different educational levels witnessed this correlation (see Table 2), Spearman’s rho analysis reveals that the respondents with postgraduate education are the strongest to witness this correlation ( $r(59) = .263, p < .05$ ), followed by the respondents with university education ( $r(153) = .532, p < .01$ ), but not the respondents with a high-school education. These results indicate that inclusive leadership considers the opinions of the well- and highly-educated employees more than those with high-school education when making decisions.

**7. Discussion**

When investigating the extent to which inclusive leadership is correlated to employee well-being in public organizations, the results build on previous research (see Ahmed et al, 2021; Buskirk, 2020; Korkmaz et al, 2022) and reveal that inclusive leadership is positively correlated to employee workplace well-being.

Interestingly, the results reveal that the correlation between workplace well-being and inclusive leadership differs among employees with different educational levels. The less educated respondents, representing the marginalized group, are more influenced by inclusive leadership than the highly educated respondents. This confirms that inclusive leadership is important to marginalized groups as indicated by Jin et al (2017), Liu (2018), and van Knippenberg and van Ginkel (2021).

Gender, however, did not influence the way inclusive leadership is correlated to employee workplace well-being, suggesting that not all types of diversity witness inclusive leadership equally.

The results reveal also that leadership accessibility had the strongest influence on workplace well-being followed by leadership availability and openness, indicating that it is important to allow the employees to express their opinions and ideas.

Finally, inclusive leadership traits influence workplace well-being differently based on educational levels. For employees with a high-school education and a university education, leadership accessibility had the highest correlation with workplace well-being. While for those with postgraduate education, leadership openness had the highest correlation. This indicates that being heard is crucial for employees with high school and university education, whereas considering their opinions in decision-making is more important for those with postgraduate education.

To sum up, this study confirms the stream of research on the importance of adopting positive relational leadership styles. It indicates that inclusive leadership is significantly correlated to workplace well-being, especially for marginalized groups. Second, it demonstrates that not all types of diversity are equally influenced by inclusive leadership. Finally, it reveals that inclusive leadership traits correlate differently to workplace well-being. Leadership accessibility proved to be more important than leadership openness and availability, respectively.

Despite these important conclusions, this study has a few limitations. First, it relied on self-reports which can be biased. Therefore, further longitudinal studies are recommended to verify the results. Second, as this study has focused on gender and educational levels as different facets of diversity, it is recommended that further studies investigate how other types of diversity might be influenced by inclusive leadership. Finally, this study was implemented on respondents working in the local government. Hence, further cross-sectional and cross-cultural studies are recommended to verify further the results.

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