

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, AND EMPLOYEE SPEAKING-UP BEHAVIOR: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Рассматривается связь инклюзивного лидерства, психологической безопасности и инициативного высказывания сотрудников.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное лидерство; психологическая безопасность; инициативное высказывание сотрудников; управление персоналом; организационное поведение.

ABSTRACT

This review examines how inclusive leadership may foster employee speaking-up behavior through psychological safety.

Keywords: inclusive leadership; psychological safety; employee speaking-up behavior; human resource management; organizational behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations today operate in fast-changing, increasingly diverse environments, and they depend more than ever on employees who are willing to contribute ideas, flag problems, and question the way things are done. Employee speaking-up behavior — often studied under the broader label of employee voice — refers to discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or information intended to improve organizational functioning [4]. It can support organizational learning, problem solving, innovation, and the early detection of emerging problems, all of which matter more, not less, as organizations face faster cycles of change.

Yet employees do not always feel comfortable expressing their views, because speaking up can carry real interpersonal risk: employees who disagree, criticize, or propose unconventional ideas may fear damaged relationships or negative evaluation. This makes the social climate that leaders create especially important. Inclusive leadership captures leaders' openness, accessibility, and availability, and their willingness to invite and value employees' contributions [6]. By helping employees feel both a sense of belonging and recognition for what makes them distinct, inclusive leadership can support genuine participation in group processes [6].

Psychological safety offers a compelling explanation for why inclusive leadership encourages employees to speak up. Edmondson [1] defined psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, and later work established it as a well-supported predictor of learning, communication, and constructive employee behavior [2]. When employees believe that ideas, questions, concerns, and even mistakes can be raised without excessive fear of embarrassment or punishment, they become more willing to contribute information and challenge existing practices.

Recent evidence strengthens this mechanism-based account directly. Mohase, Donald, and Israel [3] tested psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee voice in a sample of 146 remote and hybrid white-collar employees in South Africa,

and found that psychological safety significantly explained part of the relationship. Their results support the view that inclusive leadership does not, by itself, remove the interpersonal risk of speaking up; psychological safety appears to be an important pathway through which inclusive leadership relates to voice.

At the same time, the relationship should not be reduced to a simple claim that inclusive leadership automatically produces speaking-up behavior. Employees must first interpret a leader's behavior as creating enough interpersonal safety before they are willing to accept the risk of speaking up, and psychological safety is likely one of several mechanisms connecting inclusive leadership with voice, not the only one.

Building on this reasoning, the paper develops an evidence-aligned conceptual framework explaining how inclusive leadership may foster employee speaking-up behavior through psychological safety. Inclusive leadership is treated as the leadership antecedent, psychological safety as the central psychological mechanism, and employee speaking-up behavior as the principal behavioral outcome.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How does inclusive leadership influence employee speaking-up behavior?
2. How does psychological safety explain the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee speaking-up behavior?
3. What organizational implications follow from creating leadership and workplace conditions that support psychological safety and employee speaking up?

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a conceptual literature review to examine the relationship between inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee speaking-up behavior, focusing on how leadership practices may create the psychological conditions that encourage employees to express ideas, concerns, and information intended to improve organizational functioning.

The analysis combines foundational theoretical contributions with recent empirical research addressing the three focal constructs.

2.2 Literature Selection and Synthesis

The literature was organized around the three central constructs — inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee speaking-up behavior — using Google Scholar and publisher databases. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, established theoretical works, and recent empirical studies that directly addressed relationships among these constructs. Foundational sources were retained because they define the core constructs, while recent studies were used to assess how the relationships have been examined in contemporary organizational settings, including remote and hybrid work.

The synthesis distinguishes direct empirical evidence from theoretical explanation and proposed relationships. The review distinguishes associations from evidence of mediation, with Mohase et al. [3] providing direct evidence for the proposed mediating role of psychological safety.

2.3 Analytical Approach

The literature was analyzed thematically around three questions: (1) how inclusive leadership is associated with employee speaking-up behavior; (2) how inclusive leadership contributes to psychological safety; and (3) how psychological safety is associated with

speaking-up behavior and may mediate the leadership–voice relationship. Findings were then integrated into the evidence-aligned conceptual framework presented in Section 4.

No original survey, interview, experiment, or other primary data were collected for this paper. All empirical statistics and findings reported below are attributed to the studies from which they were obtained, and the proposed framework is conceptual: it should not be interpreted as a causal model tested by the present paper.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Inclusive Leadership and Employee Speaking-Up Behavior

Inclusive leadership is generally characterized by leader behaviors that support belongingness while recognizing employees' uniqueness and encouraging their contribution to group processes [6]. These behaviors matter for speaking-up behavior precisely because voice is discretionary and can carry interpersonal risk [4]: leaders who are open to alternative perspectives and accessible to employees create real opportunities for information and concerns to be communicated rather than withheld.

The broader literature supports a positive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice. Randel et al. [6] conceptualized inclusive leadership as a set of behaviors that foster inclusion and, through it, behavioral outcomes. Earlier work on leader inclusiveness in healthcare teams connected inclusive leader behavior with psychological safety and active participation [5], and more recent evidence links inclusive leadership directly with employee voice in remote and hybrid work contexts [3].

An invitation to speak, however, does not guarantee that employees will use it. Employees may stay silent when they believe disagreement or criticism could carry negative interpersonal consequences — which is exactly why the leadership–voice relationship needs to be understood through the psychological conditions employees actually experience, not through leader behavior alone.

3.2 Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety concerns employees' belief that interpersonal risk-taking — asking questions, admitting uncertainty, reporting concerns, acknowledging mistakes, or voicing a different opinion — is acceptable in their work environment [1]. Inclusive leadership plausibly contributes to psychological safety because openness and accessibility signal that employees' contributions are legitimate and valued, not merely tolerated.

Nembhard and Edmondson [5] provided influential early evidence linking leader inclusiveness with psychological safety in healthcare teams, showing how leader inclusiveness shaped team members' sense of safety and willingness to participate. This is consistent with the broader conceptualization of inclusive leadership developed by Randel et al. [6], in which inclusive leader behaviors support belongingness and the valuing of employee uniqueness.

More recent research provides a more direct test. Mohase et al. [3] found that inclusive leadership was positively and significantly associated with psychological safety among remote and hybrid employees, supporting the interpretation that inclusive leader behavior shapes employees' perceptions of whether interpersonal risk-taking is acceptable — though the strength of this relationship likely still depends on organizational context.

3.3 Psychological Safety and Employee Speaking-Up Behavior

Psychological safety matters for speaking-up behavior because employees may experience the act of raising a concern or disagreement as an interpersonal risk in itself. When

employees expect ridicule, rejection, or negative evaluation, they may choose silence even while holding information that could genuinely benefit the organization. Psychologically safer environments make it easier for employees to share suggestions, concerns, and alternative perspectives instead [1, 2].

This is consistent with the wider employee-voice literature. Morrison [4] frames voice as a discretionary form of communication that benefits organizations but can carry real personal cost for the person speaking up — which is exactly the kind of perceived cost that psychological safety addresses directly. Mohase et al. [3] add direct support here as well, reporting that psychological safety was positively associated with employee voice and remained a significant predictor even when considered alongside inclusive leadership in the same model.

3.4 Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism

Together, this evidence supports the proposition that psychological safety helps explain how inclusive leadership relates to employee speaking-up behavior. Inclusive leadership appears to create the opportunities and invitations for employees to contribute; psychological safety appears to determine whether employees actually perceive the interpersonal environment as safe enough to use those opportunities.

Mohase et al. [3] provide the most direct evidence for this claim, since their study explicitly tested psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee voice, rather than only testing the two direct associations separately. Their design — a cross-sectional survey of 146 remote and hybrid employees in South Africa — supports mediation but, like any single cross-sectional study, cannot establish the direction or durability of these effects over time.

Psychological safety should not, however, be presented as the only mechanism at work. Employee voice may also depend on trust in leaders, employees' felt responsibility for constructive change, broader organizational climate, team relationships, and the expected consequences of speaking up. The present framework focuses on psychological safety as the central, best-evidenced pathway, while leaving room for these additional mechanisms in future research.

3.5 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the reviewed literature supports three connected relationships: inclusive leadership is associated with employee speaking-up behavior; inclusive leadership is associated with psychological safety; and psychological safety is associated with speaking-up behavior. Together, these relationships support a focused mediation framework in which psychological safety links inclusive leadership with employee speaking-up behavior — while a smaller direct relationship between inclusive leadership and speaking-up behavior, independent of psychological safety, also remains plausible and is retained in the framework below.

The central conceptual claim is therefore that inclusive leadership can foster employee speaking-up behavior largely by creating the psychological safety employees need to accept the interpersonal risks of expressing ideas, concerns, and alternative perspectives. Because much of the existing evidence relies on cross-sectional, self-report designs, the language of association and proposed mechanism is used throughout rather than stronger causal claims.

4. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Theoretical Logic

The framework is grounded primarily in the psychological safety perspective developed by Edmondson [1] and extended by later scholarship [2]. Within this perspective, inclusive leadership is the leadership condition that can shape employees' perceptions of interpersonal safety: inclusive leaders demonstrate openness to employees' perspectives, make themselves available for interaction, and actively encourage participation, communicating that employees' contributions are valued and that voicing a different viewpoint is acceptable.

Psychological safety represents the central psychological mechanism. When employees believe their workplace allows them to raise ideas, questions, concerns, or disagreement without disproportionate interpersonal cost, they become more willing to engage in speaking-up behavior — the principal behavioral outcome, encompassing discretionary communication meant to contribute information, flag problems, propose improvements, or constructively challenge existing practices.

4.2 Conceptual Model

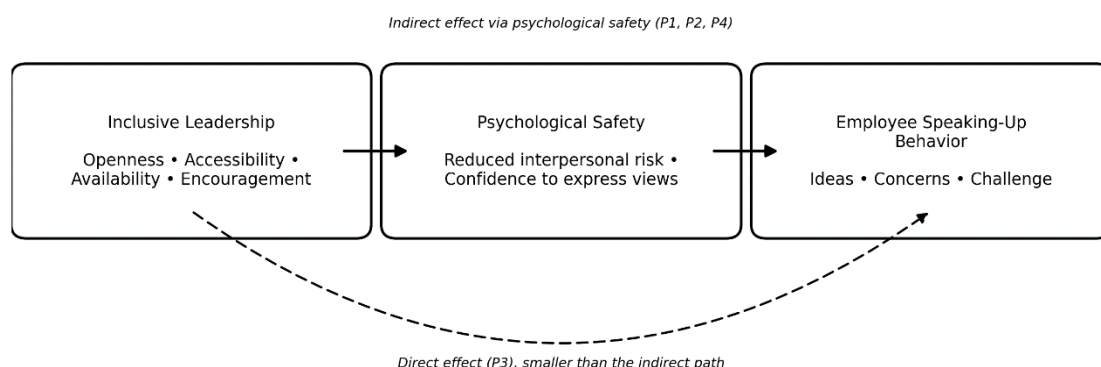


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework linking inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and employee speaking-up behavior.

Note. The solid arrows represent the proposed indirect path, in which psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee speaking-up behavior (P1, P2, P4). The dashed arrow represents the proposed direct relationship between inclusive leadership and employee speaking-up behavior (P3). The framework is conceptual and does not establish causal relationships.

4.3 Propositions

P1. Inclusive leadership is positively associated with psychological safety.

P2. Psychological safety is positively associated with employee speaking-up behavior.

P3. Inclusive leadership is positively associated with employee speaking-up behavior, including a smaller direct relationship not explained by psychological safety.

P4. Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee speaking-up behavior.

5. DISCUSSION

The review suggests these constructs are best understood as interconnected, not as independent organizational phenomena that happen to correlate.

The central argument is that inclusive leadership can create the social conditions from which psychological safety develops, while psychological safety makes employees more willing

to accept the interpersonal risk of speaking up. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence that directly tests psychological safety as a mediator between inclusive leadership and employee voice [3].

An important implication follows from this: leadership behavior alone may not be sufficient to generate employee speaking up. A leader can explicitly invite input, and employees may still stay silent if they believe disagreement could damage a relationship or invite negative judgment. Psychological safety is therefore best understood as the explanatory link between what a leader does and how an employee actually responds.

The framework also helps explain why the same inclusive leadership behavior can have different effects across contexts. Organizational climate, prior experience with managers, team relationships, and employees' own expectations about the consequences of speaking up can all change how a given leadership behavior is interpreted — and therefore how much psychological safety it actually produces.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This framework contributes to organizational behavior and human resource management research in three ways. First, it places psychological safety at the center of the leadership-speaking-up relationship, rather than treating it as a peripheral workplace characteristic. Second, it separates the leadership antecedent from the psychological mechanism and the behavioral outcome, offering a clearer account of how inclusive leadership translates into employee behavior. Third, it connects individual psychological perceptions with organizational-level outcomes — communication, learning, and improvement — through employee speaking-up behavior specifically.

Its contribution is a focused, evidence-based account of the strongest currently supported pathway, one that can be empirically extended through additional mediators — such as trust in leadership or felt responsibility for change — and contextual conditions such as team size, industry, or work arrangement.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

6.1 Practical Implications

For HR professionals and organizational leaders, the clearest implication is that encouraging employees to speak up takes more than a formal invitation to participate. Organizations need leadership behaviors that visibly communicate openness, accessibility, respect, and genuine interest in employee perspectives — managers who actively ask for alternative viewpoints, respond constructively to concerns, and do not treat disagreement as disloyalty.

HR departments can build inclusive leadership and psychological safety directly into leadership-development programs, managerial performance evaluations, employee feedback systems, and team-development initiatives. The goal should not simply be more employee speaking up in volume, but conditions in which employees feel able to communicate both promotive information — improvement suggestions — and prohibitive information — concerns about risks or practices that are not working.

6.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this is a conceptual literature review with no original primary data collected, so the proposed relationships cannot be read as causal findings of this paper itself. Second, much of the underlying empirical literature relies on cross-

sectional designs and self-reported measures — including the key mediation study this framework leans on most heavily [3] — which can establish association but not temporal ordering or causality.

Third, the meaning and consequences of speaking-up behavior likely vary across organizational and cultural contexts; findings from one setting, such as the South African remote/hybrid sample discussed above, should not be assumed to generalize automatically elsewhere, including Central Asian organizational contexts, which this literature has not yet studied. Finally, psychological safety is unlikely to be the only mechanism connecting inclusive leadership with speaking up. Future research should examine additional mechanisms and boundary conditions — trust in leaders, felt responsibility for constructive change, organizational climate, team dynamics, and differences between remote, hybrid, and traditional work arrangements.

7. CONCLUSION

Inclusive leadership has become increasingly important as organizations try to benefit from employees' knowledge, experience, and diverse perspectives. But leadership inclusiveness alone does not fully explain why employees choose to express ideas, concerns, or alternative viewpoints — something has to bridge what a leader does and how an employee responds.

This conceptual review proposes that psychological safety is that bridge. Inclusive leaders can create conditions of openness, accessibility, and encouragement, while psychological safety reduces employees' perceived interpersonal risk and makes speaking up genuinely feasible rather than merely permitted.

The proposed framework positions inclusive leadership as the antecedent, psychological safety as the central psychological mechanism, and employee speaking-up behavior as the principal outcome — while recognizing that other mechanisms likely operate alongside psychological safety. Future empirical research should test this mediation model with longitudinal, multi-source designs and examine whether contextual factors, including cultural and regional context, change the strength of these relationships.

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