

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND VOICE BEHAVIOR OF EMPLOYEES IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTREPRISES OF AJ&K: A SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In this paper, we have proposed a hypothesized model based on Social Exchange Theory. We argued that inclusive leadership impacts the voice behavior of employees working in the SMEs sector of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. We further argue that the hypothesized relationship is mediated by psychological safety. To empirically test the hypothetical model, we collected the data from various SMEs, given that the SMEs must have a distinct organizational structure such employees must be managed/supervised by a leader or manager in the distinct department. We distributed the questionnaires to target population with prior permission and data received a useable questionnaire of 232 after eliminating questionnaires with some missing data. SPSS 24 and AMOS 24 were used for data analysis and the results have supported our hypothesized relationships. The study discussed the implications and future directions also.

INTRODUCTION

The business environment has become challenging for all organizations in the contemporary business environment. In this century, it has become more difficult for business to survive and flourish for a long period of time due to heightened competition, innovative products and services and ever changing operating environment (O'reilly & Tushman, 2008; Lavie, Stettner, & Tushman, 2010; Sun & Zhang, 2025). All that matters during the fierce competition is employee's innovative efforts through exhibiting vice behavior (Javed et al., 2019; Guo, Unsworth, Bretter, & Davis, 2024). To be a successful leader employee, voice becomes very important factor for growth of an organization and also important for

technological changes in business environment (Setyowati, Widayanti, & Supriyanti, 2021; Cheng, 2017; Ajmal, Sareet, & Islam, 2025). The past research reveals that employees voice or extra role behavior is deemed important for goal setting and improved managerial decision making in complex environment to meet environmental and competitive challenges (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Köllinger, 2006; Ajmal et al., 2025).

The heightened competition and mounting pressure from the stakeholders, leaders have to take immediate actions to respond to the market needs. Voice behaviors stemming from employees are a potential source of creative inputs and problem

solving (Tian & Zhai, 2019; Agarwal, 2025) employees voice behavior can be encouraged when leader is inclusive and supportive, hence, employees feel the importance of being heard (Karimi & Khawaja, 2024; Kim et al., 2025).

Previous studies have focused on various construct and contingent factors promoting employees voice behavior (Javed et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2025). A significant number of past studies unearthed the role of various leadership styles and its consequences on employee's behavior within the work setting. For example, studies have been conducted both at individual and group levels to ascertain the essence of leaders-followers relationship in shaping extra role or voice behaviors (Javed et al., 2019; Tian & Zhai 2019; Iqbal et al., 2022; Badru et al., 2024).

Research have focused on certain types of leadership style on employee voice (Detert & Burris, 2007, Walumba & Achaubroek, 2009), however, there was very little knowledge about the significances of direction on employee voice behavior in SMEs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Based on the selection of recent research in the field of leadership and its role in shaping employees' behaviors in SMEs sector is only known a little (Javed et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2022) in context of Asian culture with a particular reference to Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Hence, this current gap in the scholarlily debate on leadership, innovation and employees' behaviors is of paramount importance to be investigated in the lens of social exchange theory. The relationship between specific type of leadership style and how the value of supervisor- employee connection affect employee voice is not well understand, finally researchers have recommended and examined employees observations on the cost and benefits of speaking up (Detert & Burris, 2007; Iqbal et al., 2022) how leader may affect such assessment deserves additional theorization. We argue that our proposed hypothesized model could have been tested in Western Culture with different research settings, population and sample and study objectives. However, there are no such studies till date in the SMEs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. The SMEs sector has significantly fragmented over the past few years in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, hence, studying the changing landscape of cutthroat

competition becomes imperative to provide unmatched and innovative products and services.

The objective the current study is to investigate the role of inclusive leadership in promoting voice behaviors of employees working in SMEs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan by utilizing Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Social exchange theory suggests that relationships are formed and maintained through a process of cost-benefit evaluation (Umrani et al., 2024). Essentially, it examines how much effort individuals invest in interpersonal connections. By weighing the rewards against the drawbacks, this approach helps reveal whether one party may be contributing more than the relationship justifies. We argue that our study will significantly contribute in the body of knowledge as no such studies have been conducted in Azad Jammu and Kashmir SMEs sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Leadership and Employee's Voice Behavior

Nembhard and Edmonson (2006) were the first to define inclusive leadership as an association smartness that acknowledges differences among participants. Inclusive leadership is characterized by accessibility, openness, and availability in interactions with followers (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). It is responsible for managing variance, which goes beyond recognizing diversity to link its value with team members' behaviors (Carmeli et al., 2010; Swaminathan & Rajkumar, 2010). By fostering inclusivity, leaders create teamwork conditions that reduce conflict, strengthen cooperation, and improve team performance (Detert & Burris, 2007; Swaminathan & Rajkumar, 2010).

Employee decisions to resign are often based on two responses: voice and exit. Hirschman first proposed the concept of employee voice as a means of addressing dissatisfaction by expressing opinions rather than quitting. Voice allows employees to raise concerns for organizational benefit. Several management studies highlight the importance of encouraging worker participation (Detert & Burris, 2007), with employee voice understood as a social behavior (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Iqbal et al., 2022; Agarwal, 2025). Leadership influences performance and productivity by shaping employees'

work attitudes. When leaders provide opportunities to express voice, share information, and embrace challenges, employees experience greater psychological safety (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

Inclusive leadership, through accessibility, visibility, and availability, promotes follower interaction (Carmeli et al., 2010; Javed et al., 2019, Umrani et al., 2024). Such leaders actively involve employees in decision-making, seeking their ideas and input (Edmondson & Bransby, 2022). When employees are encouraged to participate, speak openly, and generate ideas, voice becomes a clear outcome of inclusive leadership. Therefore, leaders of this day and age must have to embrace the modern way of leading the young generation particularly. Employee voice is considered an individual behavior yet leadership acts as a key driver of organizational change (Choi, 2007; Detert & Burris, 2007; Javed et al., 2019). Leaders who embrace inclusivity foster new ideas and innovation (Amabile et al., 1996; Iqbal et al., 2022). By fulfilling inclusive leadership characteristics, leaders enhance fairness in both outcomes and processes, strengthening employee motivation (Hollander, 2012). Voice, supported through fair rewards, is integral to motivating employees (Park et al., 2022). Inclusive leaders promote idea generation by supporting, developing, and encouraging employees (Javed et al., 2019; Umrani et al., 2024).

Inclusive leadership also drives employee innovative behavior in two major ways. First, leaders energize their teams to engage in innovation by fostering intrinsic motivation (Javed et al., 2019; Orekoya, 2024). Greater involvement stimulates innovation, as motivation links to organizational support. Second, inclusive leadership provides freedom and autonomy, aligning with organizational support theory. Trust becomes central, as employees rely on it to develop and apply diverse skills (Boran). Inclusive leadership fosters belonging (Randel, 2018), values diversity, and helps manage conflict. Leaders who demonstrate openness, clarity, and availability enhance psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010) and strengthen team identity (Orekoya, 2024).

Ultimately, inclusive leadership encourages employees to pursue tasks with dedication. By promoting fairness, engagement, and innovation, it

strengthens employee voice and fosters an environment where creativity and performance can thrive. In line with previous studies of Javed et al. (2019), Iqbal et al. (2022), the following hypothesized relationship is expected:

Hypothesis 1: Inclusive relationship positively impacts employee's voice behavior.

Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a personal belief of the employees taking or exhibiting risky behavior such as innovative or voice behavior in relation to the leadership (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). To improve psychological safety, leaders must enhance team performance and align members on suitable tasks. Inclusive leadership requires influential guidance to achieve organizational goals, emphasizing collective rather than individual efforts (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Carmeli et al., 2010). Teams become more responsible and effective when leaders share ideas, information, and involve members in decision-making. In this regard, Edmondson and Lei (2014) and subsequently, Javed et al. (2019) argued that leaders strengthen performance by improving both individual and team contributions.

According to Ingram (1997), the inclusion is influenced by leaders transformational and transactional behavior. For example, when leaders encourage contributions and acknowledge each member's value, which increases motivation and performance, thereby exhibiting inclusive leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010). Psychological safety, a crucial organizational component, is shaped by norms and ethical attitudes, guiding employee motivation, beliefs, and freedom of expression (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Javed et al., 2019; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Research shows that leadership strengthens psychological safety when it fosters an ethical climate, particularly for employees with lower performance (Calabrese & Robert, 2002; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Leaders also provide behavioral criteria for addressing psychological challenges, supported by institutional rules that reinforce safety (Orekoya, 2024).

The ethical display of inclusive leaders revolves around five key dimensions such as, rules, law, code of conduct, care and independence (Cullen,

Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). The employees' well-being can only be ensured when they are psychologically safe within the organizational context. Because not all employees come up with innovative and implementable solutions to old or existing problems. Therefore, a climate where employees feel safe to share new ideas without compromising their self-respect and reputation within the organization can generate significant number of creative inputs which can be beneficial for the organization (Cullen et al., 20003; Carmeli et al., 2010, Javed et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2022, Edmondson & Lei, 2022).

Previous research has shown that inclusive leadership positively affects employees psychological safety which is a precursor for creativity and innovation (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006, Javed et al., 2019, Iqbal et al., 2022; Zhan, Wu &, Jai, 2025). Therefore, based on past research, the following hypothesized relationship is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relationship between Inclusive leadership and psychological safety.

Mediating Role of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a felt behavior of the employees within the organization where they feel secure while sharing innovative ideas (Iqbal et al., 2022). According to Edmondson and Lei (2014), the construct has been discussed from the various standpoints in leadership and organizational behavior literature. However, essence of the construct remained unchanged ever since. For example, a plethora of research studies conducted in various cultures and organizational settings, it is set to believe that psychological safety means openness in idea sharing, motivational organizational environment and giving and receiving feedback with an open heart and mind (Javed et al., 2019, Iqbal et al., 2022). Inclusive leaders can only foster creativity and innovation when employees are assured of their psychological safety. According to Amabile et al. (1996), employees' creativity is enhanced when they feel independent (Tian & Zhai, 2019), being heard and valued, Carmeli et al. (2010), and leaders' show empathy (Iqbal et al., 2022). Contrary to this situation, an organizational environment can be creativity killer. Employees focusing on voice

behaviors i.e. creativity and innovation are requiring leadership support, inclusion, safety of personal reputation, well being and mutual trust (Cullen et al., 2003).

Based on Social Exchange Theory (SET), perspective, which entails that employee's tendency to look for rewards and avoiding any reciprocal punishment is the tenet of theory. The researcher have advocated that human behavior within a specific organizational environment can be best studied with lens of SET (Blau, 1964; Badru et al., 2024; Umrani et al., 2024). The researchers further argued that from relationship perspective, SET sets clear directions to investigate the relationship between leaders and employees. Employees can only exhibit extra role or voice behavior when they feel psychologically safe. This implies that psychological safety transmits the effects on voice behavior. Therefore, based on past studies and on the notions of SET, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and voice behavior of employees.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the current study, we aimed to investigate the role of psychological safety in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee's voice behavior with a particular reference SMEs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Employees in this sector have workload pressure and are busy in routine tasks (Hanjra et al., 2010). The SMEs sector's employees need more inclusion and psychological safety to engage in novel solutions to the problems and satisfying customers. The data were collected from employees and their immediate managers/leaders during a study program at University of Kotli Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Prior to data collection, permission was sought from the managers/owners of the various SMEs citing the importance of the study and ensuring the anonymity of the respondents. It was also stated that participation is voluntary, and the participants can choose not to respond to any questions if they deemed necessary to do so. We selected all those SMEs having at least 30 employees working in different sections and be supervised or managed by a designated individual. We distributed 350 questionnaires to employees and received 245 filled

questionnaires with a response rate of 70%. After the careful scrutiny of the questionnaires, all the questionnaires containing missing data were eliminated and a useable count of questionnaires were 232 for further analysis.

Measures

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leader was measured by using 9 items scale developed by Carmeli et al. (2010). The sample item was ‘The managers is open to hearing new idea’ We calculated at Cronbach alpha for this construct and the alpha value was .90.

Employee Voice

Employee voice was measured with 5 items scale developed by Walumbwa (2012). The sample item was ‘Employee voice and encourages other to

participate in many issues that team affected’. The reliability of this item was .85.

Psychological Safety

It was measured using 5 items scale of Carmeli et al. (2010). The sample item was “It is easy for me to ask other members of this organization for help”. The reliability of this item was .91

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS - 24 and for Structural Equation Modelling, AMOS - 24 was used. Cronbach alpha and descriptive statistics were calculated prior to hypothesis testing using SEM. The descriptive statistics were calculated on study variables, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	232	1.00	2.00	1.21	.41
Age	232	1.00	5.00	2.93	1.28
Education	232	1.00	5.00	2.21	1.60
Experience	232	1.00	5.00	2.37	1.37
IL	232	1.00	5.00	3.29	.94
EV	232	1.00	5.00	3.20	1.0
PS	232	1.00	5.00	3.57	.83

The mean and standard deviation of the variables are shown in table. The higher mean value shows that participant responses are more supported near agreement side for a variable’s given items while the

lower mean value shows respondents and in the direction of agreement side for a variable’s given item.

Table 2: Correlation

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	1						
Age	.08	1					
Education	.12	.09	1				
Experience	.08	.66**	-.02	1			
Inclusive Leadership	-.01	.01	.04	.00	1		
Psychological Safety	.00	.07	.08	.06	.43**	1	
Employee Voice	-.01	.05	.04	.05	.32**	.41**	1

N=232 *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

The correlation analysis shows the direction of relation (either positive or negative) among variables. In table 2 the correlation analysis shows same hypothesized direction of relation among variables. It

illustrates that inclusive leadership is positively associated with psychological safety (r=.43, P<.01) and employee’s voice (r=.32, P<.01). Similarly, psychological safety is also positively and significantly

correlated with employees' voice and employee voice (r=.42, P<.01).

Table 3: Direct Relationships

Structural Path		SE	Path Coefficient	P Value
Inclusive Leadership	→ Employee Voice	.06	.31	***
Inclusive Leadership	→ Psychological Safety	.04	.38	***

N=232 *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Based on literature, we proposed the hypothesis that inclusive leadership will positively impact employee's voice. The results have supported the proposed relationship as shown in table 3 ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.01$). Similarly, we proposed that there is a positive

relationship between Inclusive leadership and psychological safety. As shown in table 3, the results have supported the hypothetical relationship ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$).

Table 4: Indirect Path

Bootstrap results for indirect effect	Path Coefficient	P-Value	BC (95% CI)
IL → PS → EV	.14	<.05	(.07, .21)

CI = Confidential interval, BC= Bias Corrected 1,000-bootstrap samples, IL= Inclusive Leadership, PS= Psychological Safety, EV= Employee Voice .

Based on the Social Exchange Theory perspective, we proposed that psychological safety mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' voice behavior. The mediation analysis of the data shows that psychological safety mediated the relationship, hence supporting the study hypothesis as shown in table 4.

et al., 2022). This implies that if the employees are psychologically safe, they will exhibit risk taking behavior i.e. voice behavior.

We also proposed that the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice behavior does not occur in the vacuum but there is a potential underlying mechanism that can shape this relationship. Psychological safety was introduced as mediator between independent and dependent variables and the results supported the proposed model. This implies that if psychological safety can potentially yield certain benefits if ensured within cotemporary organizations.

DISCUSSION

In line with past research, we proposed that the relationship between inclusive leadership and employees' voice behavior is in positive direction. The present research shows that voice behavior is significantly observed in textile industry of Azad Jammu and Kashmir where leaders are inclusive. Employees can share innovative ideas and solutions of the problems quite frequently. The findings are in line with past research (Carmeli et al., 2010; Javed et al., 2019). Similarly, we proposed that there is a positive relationship between psychological safety and employees' voice behavior. The results have supported the hypothesized relationship and are in consistent with past studies (Javed et al., 2019; Iqbal

Conclusion, Implications and Future Direction

This study sought to explore the role of inclusive leadership in fostering employee voice behavior through the mediating mechanism of psychological safety within the SMEs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. In line with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the findings reveal that employees are more likely to speak up, share innovative ideas, and engage in constructive extra-role behaviors when they

perceive their leaders as inclusive, supportive, and accessible. The results confirmed that inclusive leadership is positively associated with both psychological safety and employee voice, highlighting the critical role leaders play in shaping the organizational climate. Importantly, psychological safety was found to mediate this relationship, suggesting that inclusivity alone is not sufficient; employees must also feel safe and respected in order to fully express their concerns and suggestions. The findings of the current study are in line with the past research (Carmeli et al., 2010, Javed et al., 2019).

These findings add to the growing body of leadership and organizational behavior literature by extending the scope of research to the underexplored context of SMEs in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Given the competitive pressures and fragmented nature of the SME sector in this region, fostering employee voice through inclusive leadership practices can offer firms a valuable competitive advantage. Employees who feel psychologically safe are more willing to contribute novel solutions, thereby enhancing organizational adaptability and performance.

The study also offers practical implications. Leaders in SMEs should prioritize behaviors that promote openness, fairness, and active engagement with employees. Creating a psychologically safe climate will not only encourage innovation but also strengthen trust and collaboration, both of which are essential for sustaining growth in today's volatile business environment.

In conclusion, inclusive leadership coupled with psychological safety provides a strong foundation for cultivating employee voice in SMEs. By recognizing and valuing employee input, organizations in Azad Jammu and Kashmir can better navigate challenges and secure long-term success.

Our research offers both practical and theoretical implications. The study suggests that innovation can be achieved when employees are being ensured that they are psychologically safe while voicing their ideas. Managers can enhance employees' morale by being available to them when and where they need them. In terms of theoretical implication, the current adds up in the existing knowledge of leadership.

Future research can be accrued on the relatively larger sample size by adding any moderating variables such as organizational culture. Also, future

researchers can consider technology companies and the use of generative AI in creative thinking and decision making can be used as variable.

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