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**INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND ORGANIZATIONAL
COMMITMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

Lumatul Faizah¹, Nurita Juhdi^{2*}, Nur Fariza Mustaffa³

¹PhD Business Administration (Kulliyah of Economics and Management Sciences), International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

 f.lumatul@student.iium.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4720-927X>

²Assoc. Prof. (Kulliyah of Economics and Management Sciences) Employment, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

 nurita@iium.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5924-2650>

³Department of Business Administration, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur

 nfariza@iium.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5155-2062>

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Employee engagement is a critical factor influencing organizational performance, innovation, and retention in contemporary work environments. Leadership plays an essential role in shaping employee engagement; however, the mechanisms through which leadership affects engagement remain insufficiently integrated. This study aims to examine how inclusive leadership influences employee engagement through the mediating roles of psychological safety and organizational commitment. Using a literature review approach, this study synthesizes prior empirical and conceptual research on leadership and employee engagement. The findings indicate that inclusive leadership characterized by ethical behavior, openness, authenticity, and support enhances employee engagement both directly and indirectly. Psychological safety enables employee voice, trust, and participation, while organizational commitment strengthens employees' emotional attachment and loyalty, translating supportive leadership practices into sustained engagement. This study concludes that employee engagement is most effectively fostered when inclusive leadership simultaneously cultivates psychologically safe work environments and strengthens organizational commitment, offering theoretical and practical insights for sustaining employee engagement.

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Keywords:

Inclusive Leadership; Employee Engagement; Psychological Safety; Organizational Commitment; Workplace Behavior



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Introduction

Employee engagement has become a critical concern for contemporary organizations due to its strong association with productivity, innovation, ethical behaviour, and employee retention (Ghani et al., 2023). In increasingly dynamic and competitive work environments, organizations are required not only to attract talent but also to sustain employees' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural involvement in their work roles (Menezes et al., 2025). Prior studies consistently indicate that engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of dedication, initiative, and discretionary effort, while disengaged employees are more likely to exhibit withdrawal behaviours, reduced performance, and turnover intention (Desiana et al., 2024; Syah Fanissa & Indiyati, 2025). Leadership plays a central role in shaping employees' work experiences and attitudes. Beyond task-oriented supervision, leadership behaviours influence how employees perceive fairness, support, and psychological conditions within the workplace (Fløvik et al., 2020). Recent literature highlights a growing shift from authoritative leadership approaches toward more inclusive, ethical, and supportive leadership styles (Liden et al., 2025). Such leadership approaches emphasize openness, respect, empowerment, and responsiveness to employee needs, which are increasingly important in knowledge-driven and people-centred organizations. Evidence from leadership research suggests that inclusive and empowering leadership styles are associated with positive employee outcomes, including enhanced engagement, innovative work behaviour, and organizational loyalty.

However, the relationship between leadership and employee engagement is not purely direct. Some agree that psychological and relational mechanisms play a crucial mediating role in translating leadership practices into employee outcomes (Avolio, 2025). One such mechanism is psychological safety, defined as employees' perception that they can express ideas, concerns, or mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Salim Almahri & Abd Wahab, 2023). Psychologically safe environments encourage employee voice, trust, and participation, which are essential conditions for engagement (Patil et al., 2025). Leadership behaviours that demonstrate support, ethical conduct, and openness have been shown to foster psychological safety, thereby enabling employees to fully engage in their work roles (Abuzaid et al., 2024). Another important mediating mechanism is organizational commitment, which reflects employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in their organization (Lo et al., 2024). Organizational commitment develops through reciprocal relationships in which employees perceive that their organization values their contributions and well-being (Li et al., 2022). From a social exchange perspective, leadership support, career growth opportunities, training and development, and positive working environments strengthen employees' sense of obligation and loyalty. Empirical evidence suggests that committed

employees are more engaged, less likely to leave the organization, and more willing to contribute beyond formal job requirements (Deepalakshmi, Tiwari, et al., 2024).

This literature review contributes to the theoretical advancement of Social Exchange Theory by clarifying the psychological and attitudinal mechanisms through which inclusive leadership translates into employee engagement. While prior studies grounded in Social Exchange Theory have largely emphasized direct reciprocity between leadership support and employee outcomes, this review extends the theory by integrating psychological safety and organizational commitment as complementary mediating constructs. Psychological safety captures employees' immediate perceptions of relational trust and interpersonal risk-taking, whereas organizational commitment reflects a more enduring exchange relationship characterized by emotional attachment and loyalty (Mitterer & Mitterer, 2023). By synthesizing evidence across diverse organizational contexts, this paper demonstrates that social exchange processes in contemporary workplaces operate not only through material or transactional exchanges, but also through relational and psychological resources fostered by inclusive leadership. Accordingly, this review enriches Social Exchange Theory by positioning psychological safety and organizational commitment as interconnected pathways that explain how inclusive leadership sustains employee engagement over time.

In addition, changes in workforce composition, particularly the increasing presence of younger generations, have intensified the need for leadership approaches that prioritize inclusion, psychological support, and meaningful engagement (Kimonyo, 2025). Younger employees tend to value autonomy, fairness, ethical leadership, and development opportunities (Saraiva & Nogueiro, 2025). When these expectations are unmet, disengagement and turnover risks increase. Consequently, understanding how leadership practices foster psychological safety, and organizational commitment has become essential for sustaining employee engagement in modern organizations (Wowor et al., 2022). Despite the growing body of research on leadership, psychological safety, organizational commitment, and employee engagement, existing studies are often fragmented, focusing on isolated relationships or specific contexts (Dumitriu et al., 2025). Addressing this gap is important to provide a clearer theoretical understanding of how leadership influences engagement through multiple, interconnected mechanisms. Therefore, this literature review aims to synthesize existing research on inclusive and supportive leadership, psychological safety, organizational commitment, and employee engagement. Specifically, the study seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of how psychological safety and organizational commitment mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. By integrating findings from prior empirical and conceptual studies, this review contributes to the leadership and human resource management literature and offers practical insights for organizations seeking to enhance employee engagement through inclusive leadership practices. There remains a lack of integrative literature that conceptually links inclusive leadership to employee engagement through both psychological safety and organizational commitment.

Literature Review

Although existing studies provide substantial evidence on leadership, psychological safety, organizational commitment, and employee engagement, much of the literature examines these constructs in isolation. A growing body of research suggests that leadership influences employee engagement indirectly through psychological and relational mechanisms rather than through direct effects alone (Goyal et al., 2025). Inclusive leadership fosters psychologically

safe environments that encourage employee voice, trust, and participation (Mohase et al., 2025). These conditions, in turn, strengthen organizational commitment by reinforcing reciprocal relationships between employees and the organization. Psychological safety and organizational commitment thus operate as complementary mediators in the leadership–engagement relationship. Psychological safety addresses employees’ immediate emotional and cognitive experiences at work, while organizational commitment reflects longer-term attitudinal attachment to the organization (Septiandri et al., 2025). Together, these mechanisms provide a more comprehensive explanation of how inclusive leadership translates into sustained employee engagement.

Inclusive Leadership

Inclusiveness refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that they are valued, respected, and treated fairly within an organization, regardless of differences in background, identity, or perspective (Platania et al., 2025). It emphasizes openness, mutual respect, and equal opportunities for participation, enabling members to contribute meaningfully and feel a sense of belonging in the workplace. Inclusive leadership has gained increasing attention as organizations seek leadership approaches that emphasize fairness, openness, and employee involvement (Liu et al., 2025). Unlike traditional authoritarian leadership, inclusive leadership focuses on empowering employees, valuing diverse perspectives, and fostering mutual respect between leaders and subordinates. Recent leadership literature highlights that inclusive, ethical, and empowering leadership styles are particularly effective in contemporary organizational settings, where collaboration and innovation are essential for sustained performance (Irianti et al., 2024). Empirical and conceptual studies consistently demonstrate that leadership behaviours significantly influence employee attitudes and behaviours (Qalati et al., 2022). Leadership that prioritizes support, ethical conduct, and empowerment contributes to positive work environments in which employees feel valued and respected. Evidence from data-driven reviews shows that inclusive and empowering leadership enhances employee engagement and innovative work behaviour by creating conditions that support autonomy, trust, and participation (Ye et al., 2022).

Similarly, empirical findings indicate that leadership behaviour and skills directly influence employees’ willingness to contribute ideas and engage in innovative activities, especially when leaders foster positive working environments (Malibari & Bajaba, 2022). Ethical and benevolent leadership further strengthens this relationship by promoting integrity and fairness within organizations. Research suggests that ethical leadership establishes trust and moral standards that reduce uncertainty and fear among employees (Metwally et al., 2019). In contrast, authoritarian leadership styles have been shown to increase employees’ intention to leave, particularly among younger generations, while benevolent and moral leadership reduce turnover intention by strengthening employees’ emotional attachment to the organization. These findings highlight the importance of inclusive leadership as a foundational antecedent of positive psychological and behavioural outcomes at work.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to employees' shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, such as expressing ideas, asking questions, or admitting mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Patil et al., 2025). Psychological safety has been widely recognized as a critical psychological mechanism that enables learning, innovation, and

engagement in organizations. When employees perceive their workplace as psychologically safe, they are more likely to speak up, collaborate, and fully invest themselves in their work roles (Mogård et al., 2023). Leadership plays a central role in fostering psychological safety. Supportive, ethical, and inclusive leadership behaviours signal to employees that their contributions are valued and that mistakes are treated as opportunities for learning rather than punishment. Studies indicate that leadership support and workplace social support significantly enhance employees' sense of psychological security, which in turn influences their attitudes toward the organization (Wang et al., 2024). Conceptual research grounded in Social Exchange Theory further emphasizes that psychologically safe environments strengthen reciprocal relationships between employees and organizations (Dhir & Vallabh, 2025).

Psychological safety is also closely linked to employee voice behaviour. Review-based evidence demonstrates that employees are more likely to express ideas and concerns when leaders are receptive and when organizational climates promote openness and trust (Jun & Lee, 2023). Conversely, hierarchical power distance, fear of retaliation, and lack of managerial openness suppress employee voice and weaken engagement. As such, psychological safety serves as an essential mediating mechanism through which inclusive leadership translates into action.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment reflects the extent to which employees identify with, feel emotionally attached to, and are willing to remain with an organization (Zhong, 2024). Commitment develops through ongoing social exchanges in which employees perceive organizational support, fairness, and growth opportunities (Aliddin et al., 2024). From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, employees respond to positive treatment from their organization by reciprocating with higher levels of commitment and loyalty (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that organizational practices such as leadership support, career growth opportunities, training and development, and supportive working environments significantly enhance organizational commitment (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Career growth strongly predicts work engagement, suggesting that commitment-related mechanisms play a vital role in motivating employees to invest effort in their work. Similarly, organizational and coworker support have been found to reduce turnover intention through the mediating role of organizational commitment. Leadership behaviour is also a key determinant of commitment. Benevolent and moral leadership styles strengthen employees' emotional attachment to the organization, while authoritarian leadership weakens commitment and increases turnover intention (Grego-Planer, 2022). Superior support, rewards, compensation, and positive working environments significantly enhance employee loyalty (Shuxia et al., 2025). These findings underscore organizational commitment as a crucial attitudinal mediator linking leadership practices to employee outcomes.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Zammiti et al., 2022). Engaged employees display high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and involvement in their work, which contribute to improved organizational performance and reduced negative behaviours (Elamin et al., 2024). Prior research consistently indicates that employee engagement is associated with desirable outcomes such as innovation, ethical behaviour, and reduced workplace deviance. Leadership

and organizational conditions play a significant role in shaping employee engagement. Evidence suggests that inclusive and empowering leadership enhances engagement by providing employees with autonomy, support, and opportunities for meaningful contribution (Deepalakshmi, Priya, et al., 2024). Empirical findings further indicate that career growth opportunities explain a substantial proportion of variance in work engagement, highlighting the importance of long-term development in sustaining employee involvement (Bai & Liu, 2018). Engagement also functions as a protective factor against negative workplace behaviours. Conceptual research demonstrates that higher levels of employee engagement are associated with lower levels of workplace deviance, particularly in environments characterized by fairness and supportive job characteristics (Bujang et al., 2024). Additionally, engagement-related mechanisms such as trust and psychological security are particularly salient among younger employees, who value authenticity, ethical leadership, and meaningful work experiences.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the authors based on the reviewed literature

Case Study

Based on a literature-based study conducted by Zhou (2024) involving 400 employees, inclusive leadership is highlighted as a leadership approach capable of enhancing employee engagement and loyalty through the creation of a psychologically safe work environment. Leaders who demonstrate openness, accessibility, and supportive behavior are shown to effectively foster psychological safety, defined as a condition in which employees feel secure in expressing ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of social risks or organizational sanctions.

Zhou (2024) further explains that when employees experience a high level of psychological safety, they tend to develop stronger organizational commitment. This sense of safety strengthens employees' trust in the organization and promotes emotional attachment, making them more willing to actively engage in their work and contribute on a sustained basis. Consequently, employee engagement does not emerge solely as a direct outcome of inclusive leadership but is also shaped through the mediating roles of psychological safety and organizational commitment.

These findings emphasize that inclusive leadership plays a strategic role in creating a participative and supportive work environment. According to Zhou (2024), inclusive leadership significantly enhances employee engagement because employees feel valued, involved, and psychologically connected to the organization. The results indicate that employees working under inclusive leadership perceive greater psychological safety, which encourages them to share ideas, opinions, and feedback without fear. This sense of safety subsequently strengthens

organizational commitment, as reflected in employees' emotional attachment and their willingness to contribute in the long term.

By involving 400 respondents from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, position, and educational level, the study confirms that inclusive leadership not only directly influences employees' work attitudes but also indirectly increases employee engagement through the development of strong psychological safety and organizational commitment.

Discussion

Across the reviewed literature, leadership consistently emerges as a foundational driver of employee attitudes and behaviours. Empirical and review-based studies demonstrate that inclusive, ethical, authentic, transformational, and benevolent leadership styles foster positive work environments that enhance employee engagement, innovation, and retention (Milhem et al., 2019; Song et al., 2024; Syed & Abidin, 2017; A. Zakaria et al., 2025). In contrast, authoritarian leadership is repeatedly associated with higher turnover intention and weakened employee attachment, particularly among younger employees (Song et al., 2024). Several studies provide direct empirical evidence of the leadership–engagement relationship. Transformational leadership has been shown to significantly enhance employee engagement through increased vigor, dedication, and absorption, supported by robust structural equation modeling results (Milhem et al., 2019). Similarly, perceived authentic leadership positively influences employee engagement, with leaders' self-awareness and balanced processing identified as the most influential dimensions (Syed & Abidin, 2017). Leadership behaviour and skills also contribute to positive organizational outcomes by shaping supportive work environments that stimulate innovation and employee involvement (A. Zakaria et al., 2025; Z. Zakaria et al., 2024). These findings are reinforced by ethical leadership research, which highlights leadership integrity and moral conduct as essential elements for building trust and stability within organizations.

Beyond direct effects, the reviewed studies emphasize that leadership influences employee engagement through key psychological and attitudinal mechanisms. Psychological safety is consistently identified as a critical mediator in this process. Evidence from data-driven reviews indicates that inclusive and empowering leadership styles create psychologically safe environments where employees feel comfortable expressing ideas and taking interpersonal risks (A. Zakaria et al., 2025). Review-based research further confirms that psychological safety is a prerequisite for employee voice, collaboration, and learning, all of which contribute to higher engagement levels (Ayop & Ishak, 2023). Psychologically safe environments have also been linked to reduced unethical behaviour and workplace deviance, highlighting their protective role in organizational settings (Rosle et al., 2023). Organizational commitment emerges as an equally important mediator linking leadership practices to employee engagement. Empirical studies across manufacturing, logistics, hospitality, and public-sector contexts demonstrate that leadership support, rewards, compensation, career growth opportunities, and supportive work environments significantly enhance employee loyalty and commitment (Ismail & Zaidi, 2024; Zainal Ariffin et al., 2025; Z. Zakaria et al., 2024). Career growth, in particular, has been shown to strongly predict work engagement, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in employees' engagement levels (Zainal Ariffin et al., 2025). Conceptual frameworks grounded in Social Exchange Theory further argue that organizational investments in training, development, and psychologically supportive environments strengthen

reciprocal relationships, resulting in higher commitment and lower turnover intention (Hussain et al., 2025).

The mediating role of organizational commitment is explicitly supported by several studies. Workplace social support reduces turnover intention through organizational commitment, with commitment partially mediating the relationship between organizational and coworker support and employees' intention to leave (Diao et al., 2025). A comprehensive mini review of Malaysian civil service studies also confirms that affective, continuance, and normative commitment mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance, clarifying previously inconsistent findings in the literature (Yusuff & Shokory, 2025). Furthermore, organizational commitment has been shown to reduce job burnout more effectively than psychological capital alone, emphasizing its central role in sustaining employee well-being and long-term engagement (Ismail & Zaidi, 2024). Psychological safety and organizational commitment function as complementary mechanisms rather than isolated mediators. Psychological safety primarily influences employees' immediate emotional and cognitive experiences at work, enabling voice behaviour, collaboration, and engagement in daily tasks (Ayop & Ishak, 2023). Organizational commitment, in contrast, reflects a deeper and more enduring attitudinal attachment that sustains engagement over time and reduces withdrawal behaviours such as turnover and burnout (Diao et al., 2025; Ismail & Zaidi, 2024). Together, these mechanisms provide a comprehensive explanation of how inclusive leadership translates into sustained employee engagement and performance.

Contextual and generational factors further enrich these findings. Research focusing on Millennials and Generation Z shows that younger employees place greater emphasis on ethical leadership, authenticity, autonomy, and meaningful work experiences (Sabri & Mohd Rodhi, 2024; Syed & Abidin, 2017). When these expectations are not met, the risks of disengagement and turnover tend to increase. In contrast, inclusive leadership practices that prioritize psychological safety and development opportunities have proven to be highly effective in enhancing the engagement of the younger workforce (Hussain et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024). Studies conducted across various sectors, such as education, manufacturing, logistics, hospitality, and the public sector, demonstrate consistent patterns, indicating that the proposed leadership–engagement mechanisms are robust and applicable across organizational contexts (Ismail & Zaidi, 2024; Rosle et al., 2023; A. Zakaria et al., 2025).

However, different results are reported by Dirjo (2024), who found that inclusive leadership does not have a significant effect on employee engagement. These findings indicate that the presence of inclusive leadership does not necessarily enhance engagement if it is not supported by other factors, such as organizational systems, role clarity, and consistent management policies. Thus, the results of Dirjo (2024) suggest that the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement is not always universal, but rather highly dependent on the conditions and organizational context in which the study is conducted.

In addition, broader research trends and bibliometric analyses show an increasing academic focus on talent management, employee engagement, and leadership practices, highlighting the growing importance of psychological and relational factors in organizational research (Syed Hamzah et al., 2024). Studies examining engagement outcomes also demonstrate that high levels of employee engagement can reduce workplace deviance and enhance ethical behavior, thereby reinforcing the importance of fostering engagement through inclusive leadership and supportive organizational practices (Rosle et al., 2023). Similar engagement mechanisms have

also been identified in consumer and social contexts among younger generations, underscoring the broader behavioral significance of engagement, authenticity, and trust (Harun et al., 2025). Overall, this synthesis provides strong theoretical and empirical support for the argument that inclusive leadership enhances employee engagement through the combined mediating effects of psychological safety and organizational commitment, despite the existence of empirical findings indicating the nonsignificance of the direct relationship between these two variables. These findings extend the leadership and engagement literature by integrating psychological and attitudinal mechanisms into a unified conceptual explanation, supported by Social Exchange Theory and complementary motivational perspectives. From a practical standpoint, the evidence suggests that organizations seeking to sustain employee engagement should invest in inclusive leadership development, cultivate psychologically safe work environments, support employee voice, and provide meaningful career growth and development opportunities. Such strategies are likely to strengthen organizational commitment, reduce negative workplace behaviors, and promote long-term organizational effectiveness.

Conclusion

This literature review set out to examine how inclusive leadership influences employee engagement through the mediating roles of psychological safety and organizational commitment. The findings indicate that inclusive leadership contributes to employee engagement not only directly but also indirectly by fostering psychologically safe work environments and strengthening employees' commitment to their organizations. Psychological safety encourages employees to express ideas, participate actively, and engage in interpersonal risk-taking without fear of negative consequences, while organizational commitment enhances employees' emotional attachment, loyalty, and willingness to contribute beyond formal job requirements.

From a theoretical perspective, this review extends Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating that the relationship between leadership and employee engagement operates through interconnected psychological and attitudinal mechanisms. The integration of psychological safety and organizational commitment provides a more comprehensive explanation of how inclusive leadership sustains employee engagement over time. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations should invest in inclusive leadership development, promote employee voice, cultivate psychologically safe workplaces, and provide meaningful growth opportunities. Such initiatives can strengthen organizational commitment, enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover intentions, and improve long-term organizational effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study relies exclusively on a literature review approach and does not provide empirical validation of the proposed relationships among inclusive leadership, psychological safety, organizational commitment, and employee engagement. Second, the reviewed studies were conducted across different organizational sectors, countries, and workforce characteristics, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to specific organizational contexts. Third, the review primarily focuses on psychological safety and organizational commitment as mediating mechanisms, while other potential mediators or moderators, such as organizational culture, job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, and employee well-being, were not extensively examined.

Future research is encouraged to empirically test the proposed conceptual framework using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method approaches across diverse organizational settings. Longitudinal studies may provide deeper insights into how inclusive leadership influences employee engagement over time through the development of psychological safety and organizational commitment. Additionally, future studies could investigate contextual factors such as organizational culture, generational differences, and industry characteristics to better understand the conditions under which inclusive leadership is most effective in enhancing employee engagement.

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