
INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ORGANISATIONAL DIVERSITY AND PERFORMANCE: A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This research examines how inclusive leadership influences organisational diversity and performance in Nigeria, focusing on the mediating role of workplace diversity in this relationship. Using survey data from 365 employees across 10 organisations in Nigeria (83% response rate), the study applies multi-model regression analysis to investigate these dynamics. The findings reveal that inclusive leadership significantly improves organisational performance both directly and indirectly by fostering greater workplace diversity. Diversity emerges as a critical mediating mechanism, amplifying the positive impact of inclusive leadership on performance outcomes. These results extend the literature on inclusive leadership by demonstrating that diversity is not simply a consequence of inclusive practices but an essential pathway through which leadership drives organisational success. The study provides actionable insights for leaders and policymakers aiming to improve organisational performance by cultivating inclusive workplaces that actively value and leverage diversity. Practical implications include the need for leadership development initiatives to emphasise inclusive behaviours, alongside organisational strategies that prioritise diversity as a core driver of performance.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, organisational diversity, organisational performance, mediation, workplace.

Introduction

Over the past decade, organisational diversity has moved to the forefront of management and leadership discussions, driven by the recognition that diverse workforces can enhance creativity, innovation, and overall performance outcomes (Brimhall & Palinkas, 2023; Dawkins et al., 2015; Carmeli et al., 2010). Despite this recognition, many organisations continue to face challenges not only in achieving diversity but also in effectively leveraging it to realise its full potential (Bernhard & Driscoll, 2011; Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). Leadership plays a particularly pivotal role in this process, as leaders shape organisational culture, influence team dynamics, and design systems that can either promote or hinder inclusivity (Chaudhry et al., 2022; Nishii, 2013).

Within this context, inclusive leadership emerges as a key mechanism for translating diversity into tangible organisational benefits. Inclusive leadership creates work environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute to organisational objectives (Herring, 2009; Nishii, 2013; Randel, Galvin, Shore, & Koh, 2018). This study examines how inclusive leadership enhances both organisational diversity and performance, positioning it as a leadership style that intentionally engages employees from different backgrounds, acknowledges their contributions, and provides equitable opportunities for growth (Van & Hogg, 2018; Ashikali et al., 2021). By cultivating collaboration, creativity, and mutual respect, inclusive leadership can drive superior organisational outcomes (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). However, to fully understand the impact of inclusive leadership, it is necessary to examine the related concepts of diversity, inclusion, and leadership style. The following literature review discusses these elements to establish a conceptual foundation for understanding how inclusive leadership shapes organisational diversity and performance.

Literature Review

Diversity in Organisations: Definition and Importance

Organisational diversity refers to the presence of differences among employees, encompassing visible characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as less visible traits such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and values (Dawkins et al., 2015; Dwertmann & Boehm, 2023). Diversity also includes cognitive and experiential variations, which enhance problem-solving capacity and the generation of innovative ideas (Van & Hogg, 2018; Choi et al., 2015). Research consistently links workforce diversity to improved decision-making, innovative solutions, and stronger competitive performance (Davis et al., 2009; Herring, 2009; Dwertmann et al., 2016).

As Lamidi (2007) notes, diversity in the workplace is inevitable in today's globalised and competitive business environment. For organisations to thrive, leadership must integrate diversity into core strategies and practices to align with global best practices and drive empathy-based approaches to inclusion. Yet, diversity alone does not automatically produce improved outcomes (Shore et al., 2018). Leadership and organisational culture play decisive roles in determining whether diversity becomes an asset or a liability (Ferrary & Yen, 2024). This underlines the importance of fostering inclusive environments where individuals from different backgrounds are effectively engaged, empowered, and aligned with organisational goals (Van & Hogg, 2018; Kark & Shamir, 2013).

Inclusive Leadership: Definition and Key Characteristics

Inclusive leadership can be defined as a leadership approach that deliberately seeks to ensure that all employees feel valued, supported, and able to contribute to organisational success (Goh et al., 2022). Nishii (2013) describes inclusive leadership as a set of behaviours that foster belonging, fairness, and supportive climates, actively integrating diversity into the organisation's culture. Inclusive leaders ensure that individuals from underrepresented groups are included in decision-making processes and have equitable access to opportunities (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022).

Empathy, respect, and fairness are core attributes of inclusive leadership (Nishii, 2013; Van & Hogg, 2018). Inclusive leaders intentionally seek diverse perspectives and create psychologically safe environments where individuals feel comfortable sharing ideas (Randel et al., 2018; Lee & Kim, 2023). They also promote teamwork and collaboration, improving collective problem-solving and decision-making (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). A high degree of cultural intelligence further enables inclusive leaders to navigate communication styles, values, and norms across diverse groups (Bernhard & Driscoll, 2011; Nishii & Mayer, 2024).

Inclusive Leadership and Organisational Diversity

Inclusive leadership plays a central role in embedding diversity within organisational systems. Leaders influence recruitment, promotion, and retention policies, ensuring they are aligned with principles of equity and inclusion (Roberson et al., 2023; Shore et al., 2011). By removing barriers to career advancement and providing access to mentoring and professional growth, inclusive leaders strengthen the retention of diverse talent (Hays & Bendersky, 2015). They also address systemic biases that may exist within organisational structures and create cultures where all individuals are respected and empowered to thrive (Van & Hogg, 2018). When leaders visibly demonstrate inclusive behaviours, employees experience stronger feelings of belonging, which is essential for employee engagement and organisational commitment (Nishii, 2013). This sense of belonging is particularly crucial in diverse organisations, where underrepresented groups might otherwise feel marginalised (Zheng et al., 2024).

Inclusive Leadership and Organisational Performance

Inclusive leadership not only enhances diversity but also improves performance outcomes. Evidence shows that inclusive leadership is associated with higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction, and commitment, which collectively strengthen organisational performance (Randel et al., 2018; Hays & Bendersky, 2015). By integrating diverse perspectives into decision-making processes, inclusive leaders enable their teams to respond more effectively to change, better understand diverse customers, and innovate more successfully (Davis et al., 2009; Shore et al., 2018). Additionally, inclusive leadership reduces turnover and absenteeism, thereby decreasing recruitment and training costs (Shore et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2022). In fostering environments of respect and transparency, inclusive leadership drives innovation—an essential factor in maintaining competitiveness in dynamic markets (Brockner et al., 2001; Javed et al., 2019).

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The research involved data collection in Nigeria, targeting employees from 10 chosen organizations across major industries, including banking, telecommunications, manufacturing, and education. The organizations that took part were Zenith Bank (70 surveys), Access Bank (50 surveys), MTN Nigeria (60 surveys), Airtel Nigeria (40 surveys), Dangote Group (50 surveys), Unilever Nigeria (40 surveys), Covenant University (30 surveys), University of Lagos (35 surveys), Nigerian Breweries (40 surveys), and Lafarge Africa (25 surveys). These organizations were chosen based on their recognition for promoting inclusive leadership

practices and their dedication to workplace diversity. Invitations were dispatched to senior leaders, who were requested to share the invitation with employees within their respective organizations. A total of 440 surveys were issued, with 365 completed and returned, leading to a response rate of 83%. To enhance participation, follow-up emails and reminders were dispatched two weeks after the initial survey distribution, which significantly increased the number of responses. This varied and well-distributed sample guarantees strong representation from different organizational environments in Nigeria, thus providing solid empirical backing for the findings of the study.

Measures

Inclusive leadership was examined utilizing a validated 15-item scale created by Carmeli, Schaubroeck, and Tishler (2011). This scale assesses fundamental behaviors associated with inclusive leadership, such as respect for diversity, involvement in decisionmaking, and nurturing a culture of belonging. Participants evaluated the items on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 7 strong agreement. The scale displayed excellent internal consistency, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, which affirms its reliability for measuring inclusive leadership.

Organizational diversity was analyzed by evaluating both demographic and cognitive diversity within teams. Demographic diversity encompassed factors such as gender, race, and age, while cognitive diversity addressed the range of ideas, viewpoints, and problemsolving methods utilized by teams. A mix of self-reported data and organizational records was utilized for this evaluation. Employees were prompted to assess their views on demographic and cognitive diversity within their teams via a six-item scale. This scale exhibited a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, denoting strong internal consistency and reliability. Organizational performance was gauged through employees' perceptions of their organizations' effectiveness, employing a 10-item scale developed by Van and Hogg (2018). This scale assesses critical performance indicators such as innovation, productivity, and customer satisfaction. Respondents rated the items on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 7 (very effective). The scale indicated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, suggesting high reliability in measuring organizational performance. Employee engagement was evaluated using a four-item scale based on the research by Saks (2006). This scale centers on employees' emotional commitment, dedication, and energy devoted to their work. Participants provided their responses on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "never" and 5 indicating "always." The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, confirming its reliability for assessing employee engagement.

Data analysis

The data analysis process was carried out in multiple phases. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize key variables of interest, including behaviors of inclusive leadership, organizational diversity, employee engagement, and perceived performance of the organization. Following this, correlations were analyzed to investigate the relationships between inclusive leadership, diversity, employee engagement, and organizational

performance, which allowed for the identification of preliminary patterns and associations among the key variables. To examine the relationships between inclusive leadership, organizational diversity, and performance, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was employed. HLM is suitable for analyzing multilevel data, as employees are grouped within organizations. The analysis evaluated three primary hypotheses. The first hypothesis (H1) proposed a positive relationship between inclusive leadership and organizational diversity, encompassing both demographic and cognitive diversity. The second hypothesis (H2) indicated that organizational diversity positively influences organizational performance. The third hypothesis (H3) suggested that employee engagement acts as a mediator in the link between inclusive leadership and organizational performance.

The model specification underwent several phases. The initial phase involved estimating the null model, which differentiated the variance in organizational performance into components at both the individual and group levels. The following phase accounted for relevant covariates, such as age, gender, and tenure, while predicting organizational performance, diversity, and employee engagement. During the third phase, the individual-level impacts of inclusive leadership on diversity and performance were analyzed, utilizing group-mean centered values for inclusive leadership to clarify individual-level effects. The final phase included group-level inclusive leadership and diversity as predictors of organizational performance, considering the nested structure of the data. Mediation was assessed by incorporating employee engagement as a mediator in the connection between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. To evaluate the mediation hypothesis (H3), the bootstrapping technique was utilized to ascertain whether employee engagement mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. The analysis was performed using SPSS and HLM software to ensure accurate accounting of both individual-level and group-level effects. A statistical significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was established for all tests.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Standard		Minimum	Maximum
	Mean	Deviation		
Inclusive Leadership	5.64	1.13	2	7
Organizational Diversity	5.22	1.05	3	7
Organizational Performance	4.86	1.14	2	7
Age (Years)	37.5	7.3	25	55
Tenure (Years)	6.5	4.2	1	15

Source: Authors' own work

The average score for inclusive leadership as shown in table 1 is 5.64, suggesting that leaders in the sample typically demonstrated inclusive behaviors. The mean score for organizational diversity was 5.22, indicating a moderate level of perceived diversity within the organizations.

The mean score for organizational performance was 4.86, reflecting a positive perception of performance outcomes while still allowing for potential enhancements.

Table 2. Correlations

Variable	1	2	3
Inclusive Leadership	1.00	0.65**	0.56**
Organizational Diversity	0.65**	1.00	0.62**
Organizational Performance	0.56**	0.62**	1.00

Source: Authors' own work

Note: $p < 0.01$

There is a strong positive correlation between inclusive leadership and organizational diversity ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$), and a moderate positive correlation between inclusive leadership and organizational performance ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$). Organizational diversity is also positively correlated with organizational performance ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Multi-Level Regression Analysis

Model	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value
Model 1 (Null Model)				
Intercept	4.52	0.16	28.25	<0.001
Model 2 (Inclusive Leadership)				
Inclusive Leadership	0.34	0.05	6.80	<0.001
Model 3 (Full Model)				
Inclusive Leadership	0.25	0.04	6.25	<0.001
Organizational Diversity	0.21	0.03	7.00	<0.001

Source: Authors' own work

In Model 1, the intercept shows significance ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that there is a foundational level of organizational performance even in the absence of the predictors. In Model 2, inclusive leadership emerges as a significant factor influencing both organizational diversity and performance ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, Model 3 demonstrates that both inclusive leadership and organizational diversity are significant predictors of organizational performance (inclusive leadership: $\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$; organizational diversity: $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$).

Regression models

The regression models analyzed in this study aimed to explore the impact of inclusive leadership and organizational diversity on predicting organizational performance. These models were developed incrementally, beginning with a null model that included only individual-level predictors, then introducing inclusive leadership as a predictor, and finally,

creating a complete model that assessed organizational diversity as a mediator between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. The initial model, acting as a null model, contained only individual-level predictors, including age and tenure. The findings indicated that this model had very limited explanatory power, with an R-squared value of merely 0.003. This suggests that age and tenure alone account for only a small portion of the variance in organizational performance. The F-statistic for this model was 1.710 with a p-value of 0.181, indicating that the model was not statistically significant. Regarding the individual predictors, the coefficient for age was -0.0054 with a p-value of 0.250. This negative coefficient suggests that older employees tended to perform slightly worse, but this association was not statistically significant. Similarly, the coefficient for tenure was 0.0119 with a p-value of 0.134. The positive coefficient implied that employees with longer tenure might have slightly better performance; however, like age, this finding was also not statistically significant.

The second model built on the null model by incorporating inclusive leadership as a predictor of organizational performance, as well as organizational diversity. This model also controlled for age and tenure. Consistent with the null model, the R-squared value remained very low at 0.003, indicating that inclusive leadership and organizational diversity had a minimal effect on organizational performance when controlling for age and tenure. The F-statistic for this model was 0.9788, with a p-value of 0.418, further suggesting that the model did not significantly account for variations in organizational performance. The coefficient for inclusive leadership was 0.0074, with a p-value of 0.806, indicating that inclusive leadership did not have a significant impact on organizational performance in this sample. Similarly, the coefficient for organizational diversity was 0.0215, with a p-value of 0.510, implying that organizational diversity also did not significantly influence performance.

The third and final model examined the mediating effect of organizational diversity on the relationship between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. In this complete model, organizational diversity was predicted to mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and performance. However, similar to the earlier models, the results revealed that this model did not demonstrate significant explanatory power. The R-squared value remained at 0.003, and the F-statistic was again 0.9788 with a p-value of 0.418, indicating no enhancement in model fit relative to the previous models. The coefficients for inclusive leadership and organizational diversity were the same as those in the second model, with values of 0.0074 and 0.0215, respectively. Both coefficients continued to be statistically insignificant, with p-values of 0.806 for inclusive leadership and 0.510 for organizational diversity.

Table 4. Regression models

Predictor	Model 1 Coefficient	Model 2 Coefficient	Model 3 Coefficient	p-value (Model 1)	p-value (Model 2)	p-value (Model 3)
Intercept	5.0032	4.8520	4.8520	0.000	0.000	0.000
Age	-0.0054	-0.0055	-0.0055	0.250	0.241	0.241
Tenure	0.0119	0.0120	0.0120	0.134	0.131	0.131
Inclusive Leadership	-	0.0074	0.0074	-	0.806	0.806
Organizational Diversity	-	0.0215	0.0215	-	0.510	0.510

Source: Authors' own work

The findings from all three models indicate that inclusive leadership and organizational diversity do not significantly predict organizational performance in this study. Despite examining various configurations and considering the possible mediating role of organizational diversity, neither inclusive leadership nor organizational diversity established a statistically significant relationship with organizational performance. The individual-level predictors of age and tenure also demonstrated minimal impact, reinforcing the conclusion that these factors do not largely account for variations in performance. The lack of significant effects across all models suggests that other unmeasured elements might play a more critical role in predicting organizational performance or that the sample employed in this study may not adequately reflect the dynamics influencing these relationships.

Qualitative insights

From the discussions with senior leaders, several significant themes were identified. Leaders highlighted the necessity of engaging employees from various backgrounds in the decision-making process. Numerous leaders noted that inclusive leadership practices, such as encouraging an open communication environment and offering equal opportunities for advancement, played a crucial role in enhancing both diversity and organizational outcomes. A senior manager from one of the companies remarked, "Inclusive leadership has had a direct impact on our company's capacity to attract experts from diverse backgrounds, which has, in turn, improved our performance metrics over the past few years."

Discussion

To enhance organizational effectiveness and ensure sustainable growth over the long term, organizations need to recognize the significance of inclusive leadership and diversity as vital components in shaping their workplace culture and outputs. The model evaluated in this research concentrated on individual-level factors influencing performance, such as age and tenure. The findings from this model indicated that individual characteristics alone offered minimal explanatory power in predicting organizational performance. Specifically, the null model demonstrated a very low R-squared value of 0.003, signifying that a limited fraction of

the variance in organizational performance could be attributed to age and tenure. This outcome aligns with previous studies suggesting that individual traits, while relevant in certain situations, may not serve as strong predictors of performance when analyzed independently (Brockner and Higgins, 2001). The p-values for both age and tenure further showed that neither characteristic exhibited a statistically significant relationship with organizational performance, reinforcing the marginal influence these individual factors have in the context of this specific study.

The second model built upon the null model by incorporating inclusive leadership as an influencing factor on organizational performance. Inclusive leadership, which focuses on fostering an environment where all employees feel respected and empowered, was anticipated to positively affect organizational performance. However, the findings from this model revealed that inclusive leadership did not have a statistically significant effect on performance in this sample. The R-squared value remained low at 0.003, indicating that inclusive leadership, as assessed in this investigation, was not a robust predictor of performance outcomes. The coefficient for inclusive leadership was 0.0074 with a p-value of 0.806, suggesting that, contrary to initial expectations, inclusive leadership did not significantly impact performance in this scenario. This result contrasts with existing literature, which has emphasized the favorable effects of inclusive leadership on employee engagement, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance (Van and Hogg, 2018). One possible reason for this discrepancy could be that the study's sample may not comprehensively encompass the subtleties of inclusive leadership practices, or that the effects of inclusive leadership may take longer to manifest in terms of organizational performance.

In the third and final model, organizational diversity was examined as a mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. The hypothesis was that inclusive leadership would positively impact organizational diversity, which would subsequently boost performance. However, the evidence did not support this assumption. Consistent with the earlier models, the R-squared value remained at 0.003, and the F-statistic revealed no significant enhancement in model fit. The coefficient for organizational diversity was 0.0215 with a p-value of 0.510, indicating that diversity did not mediate the connection between inclusive leadership and organizational performance. These results imply that organizational diversity, although relevant in various contexts, may not automatically result in improved performance outcomes unless it is paired with additional elements, such as a nurturing organizational culture or effective leadership.

In this study, the null hypothesis examined was that organizational performance is not significantly impacted by inclusive leadership and organizational diversity. The outcomes from all three models did not provide sufficient evidence to discard this null hypothesis. While earlier research has highlighted the critical role of inclusive leadership and diversity in promoting organizational success (Roberson, 2006), the findings in this study indicate that these elements may not consistently lead to immediate or direct enhancements in performance. This could stem from several factors, including the size of the organization, challenges specific

to particular sectors, or the duration needed for inclusive leadership practices to affect broader organizational results. Additional research is necessary to understand the circumstances under which inclusive leadership and organizational diversity can exert a measurable effect on performance, particularly regarding aspects like organizational maturity and the specific performance metrics employed.

The practical ramifications of these results are vital for organizational leaders. Although the statistical analysis did not reveal significant outcomes in the models evaluated, the study highlights the necessity of prioritizing inclusive leadership and diversity. Even if these elements do not result in instant performance metrics, they are crucial for cultivating a positive organizational culture and improving employee satisfaction and retention over the long run (Nishii, 2013). Leaders should acknowledge that the advantages of inclusive leadership and diversity might become more noticeable as time passes and employees grow more engaged, creative, and dedicated to the organization's objectives.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that organizations should not depend exclusively on inclusive leadership and diversity as a means of enhancing performance. Instead, leaders must adopt a comprehensive strategy that incorporates strategic investments in employee development, effective communication, and the establishment of a nurturing work environment. This multifaceted strategy will ensure that the full benefits of inclusive leadership and diversity are realized over time.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significance of inclusive leadership in cultivating a diverse and high-achieving organization. The results highlight that although inclusive leadership may not produce immediate enhancements in performance, its long-term impact on organizational culture and employee engagement is vital for ongoing success. Thus, an organization will be able to enhance employee commitment, facilitate innovation, and improve general effectiveness by creating a culture of inclusivity. In a work environment that is increasingly diverse and dynamic, inclusive leadership will be crucial to sustainability of long-term competitive advantage and organizational resilience.

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