

The Role of Inclusive Leadership in Fostering Workplace Diversity

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Abstract

Purpose: The increasing diversity of the modern workforce thrusts the leaders to address the DEI; valuing the differences, ensuring equity by creating an inclusive environment. In the era of AI powered HR practices, leaders need to focus on empowering their employees - embrace the emerging changes. This paper tries to analyse how inclusive leaders promote diversity by addressing the challenges in the workplace.

Research Methodology: This paper tries to understand the workplace challenges with an informal interaction with 50 random employees from different organizations and explores existing literature further.

Findings: The study shows that diversity in the organizations paves ways to strengthen the organizational culture besides advancement of leadership styles; an inclusive leadership.

Practical implication: The findings help the HR teams to adopt inclusive leadership style to promote a belief of belongingness among their team members by assuring fairness and equality. Originality / value - This paper explores the views of the selected employees with a review of existing literature, understanding how diversity benefits the organizational growth.

Key words: diversity, inclusive leadership, equity, inclusion, workplace.

Introduction

In the era of AI powered HR practices, leaders need to focus on empowering their employees embrace the emerging changes. The increasing diversity of the modern workforce thrusts the leaders to address the DEI; valuing the differences, ensuring equity by creating an inclusive environment. Inclusive leadership is a positive leadership style that emphasizes the inclusion and respect of different employees, meeting their unique needs for belongingness and maximizing their potential as individuals (Amy E. Randel, 2018). It is a step ahead of all other leadership styles establishing the team spirit. It promotes a belief of belongingness by assuring fairness and equality and giving participants opportunities for shared decision making;

accomplishing their highest possible involvement (Ayfer Veli Korkmaz, 2022).

Workplace Diversity, an overview

Workplace diversity is the range of unique qualities among employees. These characteristics vary depending on the individuals' background, be it professional or personal. These variances are identified as abilities or disabilities with respect to the context or requirement.

As a stepping stone for further exploration on diversity, a brief study is being conducted with a small sample.

Literature Survey

The role of leaders in promoting diversity

- **Awareness, Authenticity and Accountability:**

Authenticity, one of the three As' of inclusive leadership is very significant. Authentic leaders act with intention and model a learning. They are aware that diverse and inclusive culture creates the conditions for people to be their best selves and hold themselves accountable to create such environment (Ellen Bailey, 2020). The MNCs like Infosys, Microsoft, Google etc. are the best examples creating inclusive culture, yet they may focus on other diversities like work-life balance, with due personal space and leadership development programmes.

- **ERGs:**

Awareness plays a major role in planning as well as execution of the work. To promote inclusive culture in the organization, Employee Resource Groups can be formed to enhance the environmental awareness among the employees for better outcomes. The purpose is to innovate and to invent new strategies of personal / professional development. Academic institutions may focus more on public-private partnership to improve the inclusion. Interest based groups can be formed to advance the outlook of the workforce.

- **Curiosity / Digital Awareness / AI Awareness:**

The characteristic of curiosity among leaders fosters the learning environment in organizations. The workforce becomes tech-savvy with high levels of digital awareness and AI-driven efficiency. Legitimising such practices help the employees excel in their fields. More research and projects can be taken up by the organizations to associate AI with different domains like health care, education or other specific fields for better use of technology.

- **Courage / Commitment:**

Inequality and non-inclusiveness due to (un)consciousness discrimination limits the people portray their abilities (Abravan, 2023). To uphold fair practices in the organizations, inclusive people lead by example. The formation of a diverse atmosphere positively affects organizational citizenship behaviour and effectiveness (Shin, 2024). Inclusive approaches can be undertaken to flourish grass root initiatives. Individuals can be trained to tackle with new types of tasks to improve problem-solving skills. Programmes encouraging openness to communicate maybe organized with internal / external customers.

- **Deloit's Six personas of strategic change:**

The feeling of inclusion, being confident and inspired is highly regarded. The theory emphasizes the notion that diversity without inclusion is not enough (Bourke, J., 2016). The 6Cs of the inclusive leader empowers the employees to traverse from a state of 'being opposed to change' to 'being committed', taking the responsibility of achieving diversity and inclusion goals (Bourke, J., 2016). Random job rotation strategies may be initiated to develop critical thinking skills among the team members.

- **Cultural Intelligence:**

Inclusive leaders have the ability to function effectively in cross-cultural settings (Bourke, J., 2016). Inclusive leadership is significantly correlated to workplace well-being (Ashmawy, 2023). When there is no marginalization, employees work as a team which inturn increases the productivity and profitability of the organization (Sulaiman Olusegun Atiku, 2024). Surface level inclusion may not assure bridging the cultural gaps. Global level challenges / tasks maybe assigned to each individual in the team allowing them to grow beyond the boundaries.

- **Collaboration:**

Communication barriers hinders the work flow in hospitals. People are underrepresented because of gender or experience or educational background (Abravan, 2023). Team skills; group intelligence is the need of the hour to create safe and comfortable environments in organizations (Bourke, J., 2016). ERGs and outreach initiatives make the employees collaborate with strangers too.

- **Equitable Policies / Initiatives:**

Evaluating existing DEI policies or protocols are one of the best ways to improve the work culture (Ashmawy, 2023). Workplace initiatives become superficial, if they are confined to

planning rather than implementing (Chantararat, 2023). Child welfare, women empowerment, work-life balance, career development schemes are the examples of such neglected plans despite the increased interest of the leaders. Frequent review and revival of the policies / plans help the leaders work on the issues.

- **Open communication:**

At the team level, IL indirectly enhances the innovation through team voice under performance pressure (Foropon, 2024). Implementation of strategic plans with improved feedback system may encourage the lower management to open up on important issues. Job rotation, informal gatherings among employees, personal interest groups, focussed training programmes may help them outgrow.

- **Going global / CPD:**

Employees expect personalized learning pathways that support their development. Increasing decentralization and AI-based tools delivers the training in a stress-free environment (HBP, 2024). In-house training, off the job training, increased use of online resources through multiple platforms encourage the people to explore new. Structured professional development strategies may be implemented to streamline the employees.

- **Mentorship:**

Leadership is a behaviour that promotes employees' attitude and behaviour for achieving the organizational goals (Lochan Sharma, 2024). Formation of special groups with diverse employees may complement the interpersonal relations to try top-down as well as bottom-up approaches for increased efficiency and augmented authority.

To compare and correlate the real-life experiences of the 50 respondents, a review of existing literature is being conducted. To have a better understanding of the latest developments, recent articles are chosen from the following fields, *figure 3*.

Figure 3



Research Methodology:

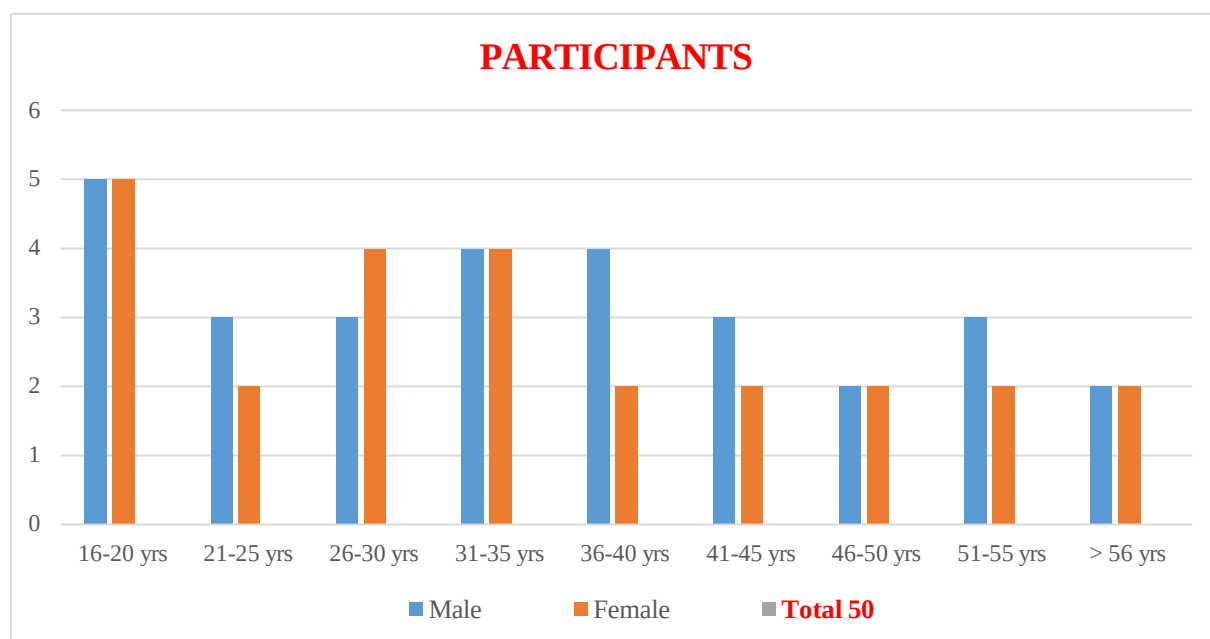
An informal interaction with 50 selected participants (names not disclosed) from different organizations in and around Vijayawada to understand the diversity through their experiences at workplace.

The sample: total – 50 participants

Employees of academic institutions - 25

Employees of grocery stores / textile shops / medical staff - 25

Figure:1: Demographic Profile of Respondents



Source: Author's Own Calculations

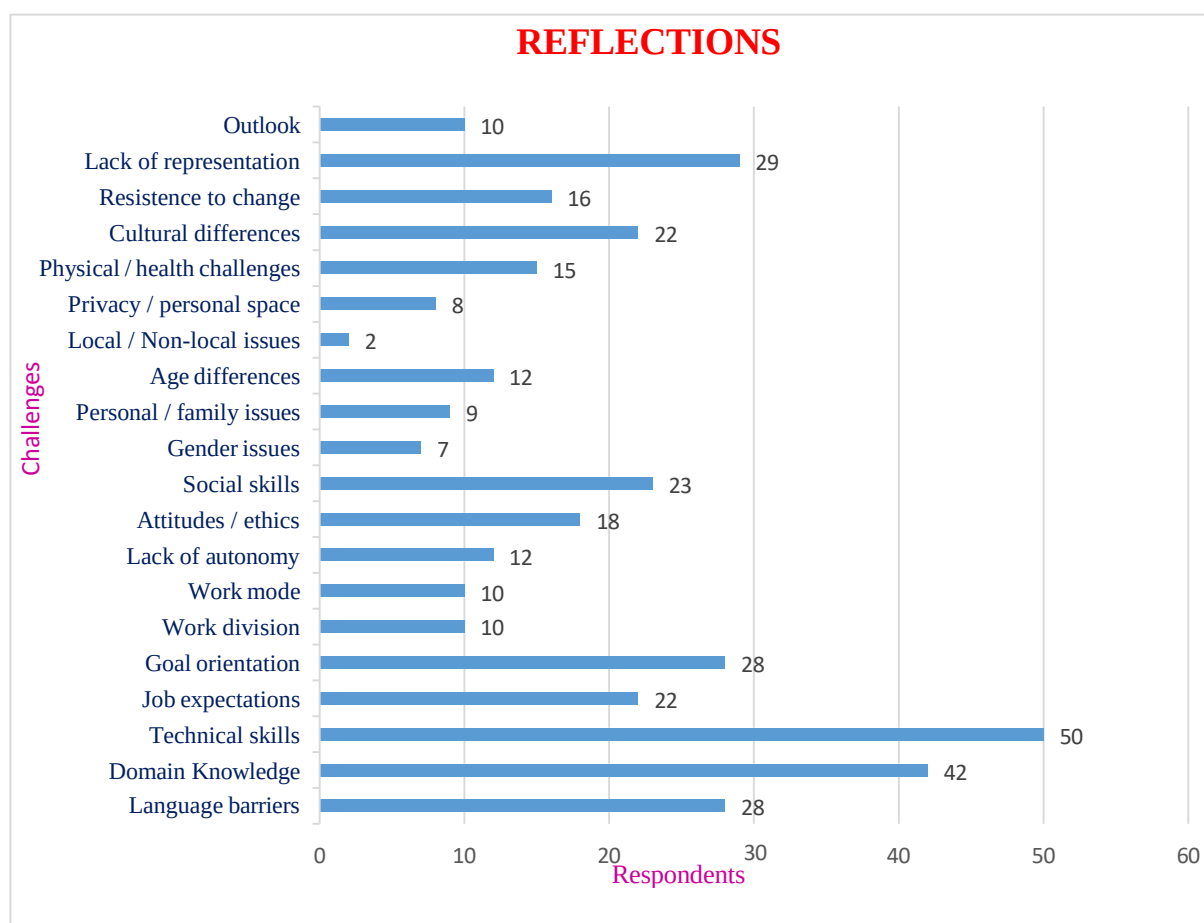
The reflections of the interactions are consolidated broadly into 20 categories as shown in *figure 2* following the text.

The respondents feel that employees have no control over their work, working hours, schedule or nature of work. A few respondents expressed their anguish of not been given importance in the organization. Two participants complain that pay scale is not structured and it affects their motto for being paid low.

In contrary a few of them opine that these differences actually elevate their individual abilities. In conclusion most of them expect that employees can focus more on their work, if these issues are addressed by the leaders.

The responses which are in common are shown in the figure below, Figure 2.

Figure 2: Graph Showing the Challenges of respondents



Source: Author's Own Calculations

Those 20 categories are classified into four groups for a better understanding.

The Characteristics:

The respondents opine that employees face challenges due to the differences in –

- **Attitudes / Behaviours**

The dimensions of the study include outlook, lack of representation, resistance to change, and ethics/attitude. Outlook examines how employees perceive their work, organizational practices, and the overall work culture within their organizations. Lack of representation focuses on the factors contributing to inadequate representation, including employees' own lack of initiative and the absence of sufficient encouragement or support from top and middle management. Resistance to change evaluates personal biases and negative perceptions that may arise from unfavourable workplace experiences or situations. Ethics and attitude examine employees' perceptions of moral values and ethical principles in relation to established professional norms, helping to understand how individual attitudes and ethical considerations influence workplace behaviour.

- **Domain knowledge / experience**

The study examines several dimensions related to employee performance and organizational effectiveness, including lack of autonomy, work mode, work division, goal orientation, domain knowledge, work experience, job expectations, and technical skills. Lack of autonomy focuses on how organizational barriers and restrictions may limit employees' decision-making abilities, initiative, and work efficiency. Work mode examines the need to adapt to emerging workplace trends and flexible working arrangements, such as hybrid teaching and night-shift schedules. Work division explores how organizational culture, established norms, and the allocation of responsibilities may either facilitate or hinder employee development. Goal orientation assesses employees' awareness and understanding of the organization's vision, mission, and objectives. Domain knowledge emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development and staying updated with the latest innovations and developments in the relevant field. Work experience considers how employees' professional exposure and practical knowledge influence their efficiency and

performance. Job expectations examine whether employees perceive their roles narrowly in terms of assigned tasks or more broadly in relation to organizational goals and social responsibility. Finally, technical skills focus on the competencies required to perform job-related activities effectively and enhance overall employee performance.

- **Social / geographical**

The study considers several socio-cultural factors that may influence employee behaviour, workplace relationships, and professional development, including cultural differences, local and non-local issues, age differences, gender issues, and social skills. Cultural differences focus on challenges such as cultural shock and difficulties in adapting to unfamiliar workplace environments, which may affect individual efficiency and career growth. Local and non-local issues examine the challenges associated with differences in social backgrounds, access to opportunities, work-life balance, and potential social inequalities within the organization. Age differences explore how generational gaps may influence workplace interactions, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of superiority or inferiority among employees. Gender issues address how personal biases, stereotypes, and unequal treatment may create barriers to career advancement and professional development. Finally, social skills emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, workplace friendships, communication, and professional networking in strengthening employee morale, fostering collaboration, and creating a supportive work environment.

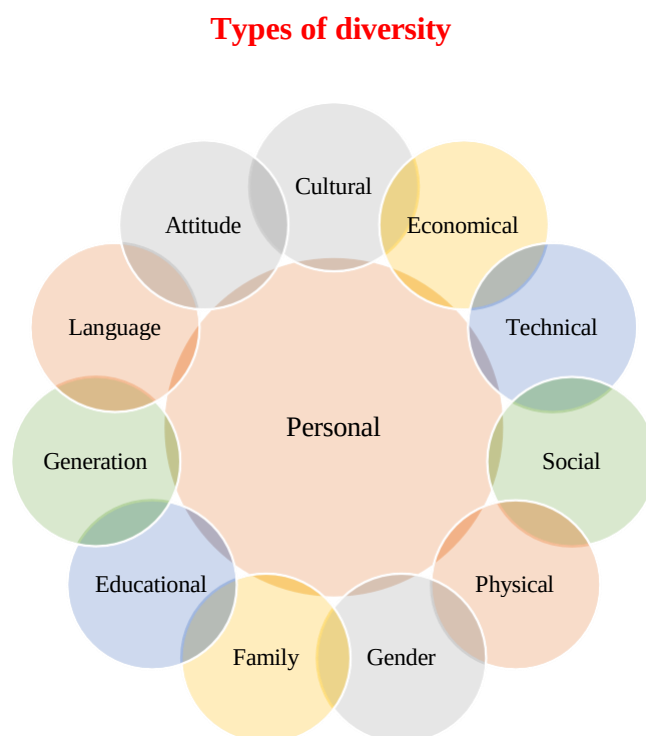
- **Personal**

The study examines various personal and workplace-related factors that may influence employees' well-being, productivity, and overall performance, including physical challenges and health issues, privacy and personal space, and personal or family issues. Physical challenges and health issues focus on how health-related conditions, including invisible or less apparent illnesses, may affect employees' concentration, efficiency, and ability to perform their responsibilities effectively. Privacy and personal space examine the influence of group dynamics, workplace interactions, and the availability of adequate infrastructure and facilities on employees' comfort, autonomy, and productivity. Personal and family issues address challenges related to family responsibilities, work-life balance, and psychological stress, highlighting how personal

circumstances may affect employees' emotional well-being, job satisfaction, and professional performance.

The literature review accomplishes the real-life experiences of the respondents. It can be explored systematically under different headings.

Figure 4



Benefits of Diversity

a) Better workplace / Creativity / Psychological satisfaction:

Inclusive work culture creates opportunities for all the employees and each individual is valued for his significant contribution. The psychological contented feeling makes the man be more creative and committed to work. It enhances the team spirit and yields better results for both the organization as well as the team. Eg: Upskilling.

b) Improved decision making / Personal development / Economic growth:

Collaborative work culture under the leadership of inclusive people empowers the individuals to aim high and be assertive to the policy decisions besides line management at the ground level. Eg: Cross-cultural communication.

c) Learning by doing:

The diversified workforce excels the working skills and be resourceful, fulfilling mutual benefits. Eg: Role playing.

Final thoughts

Inclusive leadership promotes the diversity in workplaces with a view to inclusion. The diversity, equity and inclusion can be enhanced by addressing the individual efficiencies. It creates a safe environment with a focus on employee engagement. The 6Cs of IL enhances openness to communication and empowers the employees to be collaborative and committed to the organizational goals.

Figure 5



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