INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEES' VOLUNTARY COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR – AN EXPLANATORY MECHANISM

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ABSTRACT

Leadership at workplace plays an important role in improving employees work and beyond work outcomes. Building on these lines, this study aims to study the impact of inclusive leadership on employees' communication behavior. It also entails investigation of mediating role of exchange norms moderating role of person-organization fit (PO fit). A time-lagged approach was used to collect survey-based data. All in all, 279 useful responses were received and used for analysis purpose. The statistical analysis highlights that inclusive leadership significantly influences employee communication behavior, while exchange norms mediate the relationship. The moderating role of PO fit is not statistically supported. This study is novel in nature, as the literature focusing on inclusive leadership and employee communication behavior is scant. Furthermore, there is dearth of literature focusing on the mechanism between inclusive leadership and employee communication behavior. The current, study by proposing and empirically testing exchange norms and PO fit, makes some important contribution to literature.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership; Employee communication behavior, exchange norms, PO fit.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employees can influence the organizational performance and corporate image (Lee et al., 2018). Therefore, researchers have focused on ways of improving their positive behaviors. One of such a behavior is employee voluntary communication behavior (henceforth, EVCB) covering dimension of scouting (i.e., focus on information acquisition from the environment) and megaphoning (i.e. sharing information within personal networks) (Kim and Rhee, 2011). Positive communication of employees offers positive outcomes to the organizations including enhanced creativity, improved performance, and effectiveness (Ahmed, 2023; Kang and Sung, 2017; Morrison, 2014; Park et al., 2014). EVCB is also important because through effective communication

organizations build and maintain positive relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Verhoeven and Madsen, 2022; Zhou and Xu, 2022). Therefore, there has been increased interest in studying the determinants of EVCB (e.g. Lee, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2022), but there is lot of room for investigation to identify the factors that influence the EVCB (Ahmed, 2023).

By using the underlying explanations of Organizational Support Theory (OST, Eisenberger et al., 1986), this study entails the investigation of determinants of EVCB at work. Past studies have highlighted that the employees' communication is based on their experience of workplace interventions (management, policies, environment, and

leadership etc. Kang and Sung, 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Men, 2014). Out of all the organizational factors the role of a leader is considered the most instrumental, because leaders develop a culture and environment of communication (Men and Stacks, 2014). Through such an environment, a leader encourages employees to communication with various internal and external stakeholders (Carter et al., 2013; Mahmoud, 2008; Major et al., 2008). Employees consider, such an environment, a display of care for their socio-emotional needs improving the internal organizational image (Ahmed, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2015; Ahmed and Nawaz, 2015; Eisenberger et al., 1986; Iqbal et al., 2018; Men, 2014).

Past studies have found that employee communication behavior can be improved using authentic (Hsiung, 2012; Men and Stacks, 2014), charismatic (Men, et al., 2020), and transformational leadership (Lee and Chon, 2021; Men, 2014; Tian et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019). But one of the leadership styles that has not gained due attention is inclusive leadership. According to Nembhard and Edmondson (2004) inclusive leaders possess and display the traits of openness, availability and accessibility. These traits flourish an environment where employees can communicate and share new ideas (Carmelli et al., 2010; Hirak et al., 2012). According to Lee (2022) such a culture encourages open communication at workplace which influences the EVCB because they feel psychological safety (Mitchell et al., 2015) and trust in leader (Qi and Liu, 2017). According to Hollander (2013) an *"Inclusive leadership (IL) emphasizes this role of active followership by showing consideration in doing things with people, rather than to people--- stressing respect, recognition, responsiveness, and responsibility, in both roles"* (p. 122). Therefore, this study proposes that inclusive leaders can improve employees' voluntary communication, which is an unattended area in empirical literature.

Another important consideration for the current study is proposing and empirically testing the mediating role of exchange norms. This association has been largely unattended (Ahmed, 2023), while the same can be explained using the OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This theory proposes that there exists an exchange relation between organization and employees, where employee believe that their organization values their contribution and takes care for their well-being (Ahmed et al., 2015; Ahmed and Nawaz, 2015). The care and favor indebt employees and they tend to reciprocate the same favorably (exchange) (Ahmed and Nawaz, 2015). The exchange becomes basis of level and depth of relationship between organization and employee (Iqbal et al., 2018). According to OST, leaders are considered agents of the organization and therefore their acts are believed to be acts of the organization. The inclusive leader, because of openness, accessibility, and availability creates an environment of support where employees can share ideas and communicate openly (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2004), thus their behavior is considered a support from organization which is reciprocated in form an exchange norm and they would indulge in positive communication about the organization (i.e. EVCB). So, this study contributes to literature by proposing and empirically testing the mediating role of exchange norms between inclusive leadership and EVCB.

Literature also highlights that the influence of leader is not equal for all, as it depends upon the followers whether they consider it positively or negatively. The same notion is highlighted by Deringdang et al., (2021) who highlighted that the leadership and employee outcomes relationships have been studies but with the condition of PO fit the literature lacks empirical support. A profound look at the empirical literature highlights that most of the studies have considered fit perceptions as mediator between leadership and outcomes (e.g. Chi and Pan, 2012; Haider et al., 2022; Sökmen et al., 2015). Raja et al., (2018) have studied the leadership and PO fit from a different perspective, where leadership has been considered as a moderator with predictive role of PO fit. Deringdang et al., (2021) and Charlton and Eschleman (2019) studies have considered PO fit as boundary condition between LMX and transformation leadership respectively. But, up to the best knowledge of researchers, the PO fit boundary conditioning role between inclusive leadership and EVCB is still not empirically tested.

This study contributes to literature in the following ways, (1) it considers the role of inclusive leadership in predicting EVCB; (2) it

also proposes and tests the mechanism of exchange norms and PO fit (a largely unattended area of research); and (3) This study also contributes to literature by using the theoretical lens of OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986) to propose the theoretical framework for the study.

2. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT
2.1 Inclusive leadership and employee voluntary communication behavior
Leaders, through their capacity to influence the organization, its culture and followers, can influence organizations in many ways (Men, 2014; Nabi et al., 2023). They set the direction and course of action for the firm, nourish and nurture workplace culture, and influence the corporate image (Lee et al., 2018; Men and Stacks, 2013). Leaders, being the organizational agent, influence the perceptions of the employees about their organization and workplace (Carter et al., 2013; Major et al., 2008; Men, 2014). Therefore, Iqbal et al., (2018) observed that employees translate good relationships with the leader as positive relations with the organization.

Inclusive leaders increase employee participation in all sort of management activities, including inviting them to share ideas, making them part of planning, and talking about the workplace. Being an open, receptive, inclusive, and supportive leader, an inclusive leader, tends to create an environment where employees can share and communicate openly (Carmeli et al., 2010). As the inclusive leaders build an environment of information sharing, the employee indulgence in information seeking and accepting (Hirak et al., 2012). Employees have a high level of trust in such a leader because they receive positive feedback from such a leader (Qi and Liu, 2017), therefore they feel psychological safety (Mitchel et al., 2015). All these positive organizational factors influence employees' behaviors beyond the workplace and they indulge in EVCB (both megaphoning and scouting).

The said relationship can be built upon the premise of OST, which proposes that support from organization is reciprocated by the employees favorably (Ahmed et al., 2015; Ahmed and Nawaz, 2015). Inclusive leader, through openness and availability, is believed to be showing the organizational intentions to care for the employees. Therefore, employees believe that organization is encouraging them to be open, seeking and sharing information and making valuable suggestions. In such a situation, employees tend to reciprocate positively to the organization and the leader (Ashikali et al., 2021), by positive EVCB.

H1: Inclusive leadership and employee voluntary communication behavior are positively related.

2.2 Mediating role of exchange norms
Inclusive leadership can also result in EVCB of employees indirectly, i.e. through the mediation of exchange norms. This could be attributed to the nature of inclusive leadership, where the leader focuses on availability, sharing, and value for their followers, which is considered an exchange by the followers. The followers, in response, may consider it a workplace norm set by the leader.

Workplace relationships are important as they can offer numerous workplaces and beyond work outcomes (Kim and Rhee, 2011). EVCB, a behavior of sharing information outside the organization, is largely influenced by the workplace relationships, as Lee and Kim (2017, 2022) observed that positive workplace relations increase propensity of positive information sharing by employees. Employees consider it a personal fulfillment and they portray a positive image of the organization (Hung, 2005; Walden and Westerman, 2018). This could be attributed to the perceptions that organization values their contribution and therefore they may consider reciprocating the organization favorably (Lee and Chon, 2021), by holding negative and sharing positive information (Lee and Kim, 2017). This exchange norm could be an outcome of the inclusive leadership at work, because inclusive leaders with their traits of (openness, availability, access and response) encourage employees to share ideas and information. It becomes a source of encouragement and they tend to consider it a form of organizational care and value for their work. Thus, they may feel it their responsibility to communicate positively about their organization (EVCB) (Ahmed, 2023; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2004).

The relationship can be predicted using the theoretical lens of OST (Eisenberger et al.,

1986). The inclusive leader influences the perceptions of employees that they are taken care by the organization and its representatives (the leader), which indebts them to reciprocate favorably. They feel a strong bond with the leader, as they can approach him/her anytime (formation of exchange norms, another positive workplace factor). Both the leader and presence of exchange norms influences them to reciprocate positively and they indulge in EVCB. This relationship is conjectured as:

H2: The positive relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voluntary communication behavior is mediated by exchange norms.

2.2 Moderating role of PO fit

The previous sections have highlighted the role of inclusive leadership in nurturing exchange norms and EVCB. In this section we discuss the boundary condition of PO fit. PO fit arises when an employee feels a good fit with the organizational values and culture (Ahmed et al., 2024). This could arise when an employee feels that the culture, values and practices at the workplace are consistent with the personal values of individual (Runhaar et al., 2019). PO fit offers numerous positive work-related outcomes, including: performance, citizenship behavior and turnover (Hoffman and Woehr, 2006), engagement and helping behavior (Vila-Vázquez et al., 2023).

Jehanzeb and Mohanti (2018) observed that PO fit is important as the organizational level initiatives (i.e. developmental initiatives) greater influence on employee outcomes when they feel higher level of fit. A detailed review of literature highlights that PO fit has been considered as a moderator between various organizational predictors and outcomes. For instance, Jehanzeb et al., (2017) observed that it moderates the relationship of satisfaction and retention. It has also been studied as a moderator between leadership and employee outcomes. For instance, Derindang et al., (2021) found that PO fit strengthens the relationship of leader-member exchange and outcomes. Charlton and Eschleman (2019) found that PO fit has a strong bearing on positive behavioral outcomes when the leader is transformational. They also noticed that the citizenship behavior is better predicted by the

PO fit then the transformational leadership alone. Based on these lines it is assumed that PO fit can moderate the relationship of leadership and outcomes.

The relationship of inclusive leadership and EVCB with moderation of PO fit has neither been proposed nor tested empirically, which is one of the major contributions of the current study. We propose this relationship using the lens of OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986), which proposes that inclusive leadership is translated as a form of organizational support which is reciprocated by employees by engaging in the VCB. The relationship is expected to be stronger when the employees perceive that they have higher level of fit with the organization. Contrary to that, when employees have low PO fit perceptions they tend to translate inclusive leader as insincere and translate his efforts as fake which may result in reduction of positive communication about the organization. In such a situation employee tend to avoid voluntary communication act about the organization.
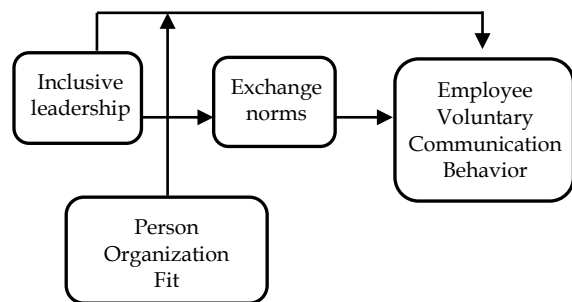
The same is hypothesized below:

Figure-1: Conceptual model

H3: The relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voluntary communication behavior is moderated by PO fit, and this relationship is stronger when PO fit is high and vice versa.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants and process

The population of the current study was the IT employees working in a large metropolitan city of Pakistan (i.e. Lahore). The managers of the 48 IT firms were approached through a formal letter and due permission was obtained for data collection. A team of hired researchers visited the selected locations between March and May 2023. After getting the informed

consent the questionnaires were distributed to them. We used the Costello and Osborne (2005) guidelines for sample size estimation (i.e. items × 10), as it was difficult to know the sampling frame. Moreover, the turnover in IT firms is higher due to job switching (Ahmed et al., 2024). So, the determined sample size was 370 (37 items × 10). The data were collected at two points of time (T1 & T2). At T1, inclusive leadership and EVCB were inquired. At this point of time 480 questionnaires were distributed while only 403 filled questionnaires were received. At T2 (one month later), the same respondents were approached to fill the remaining part of questionnaire (PO fit and exchange norms). This time only 311 questionnaires were received while 19 were considered redundant. So, we were left with effective response of 291 questionnaires which were later used for data analysis. Most of the respondents were male (n=179), had average of 24.5 years, and work experience of 3.75 years, and had a university degree (n=187).

3.2 Measures

Inclusive leadership was assessed using the 9-item scale of which covered four dimensions namely: openness (three items), accessibility (three items) and availability (three items). Employee voluntary communication behavior (EVCB) was operationalized by using megaphoning and scouting dimensions. The scouting dimension was based on the work of Lee (2022) which consisted 12 items. Megaphoning consisted eight items and was based on the work of Kim and Rhee (2011). The scale covered example items like "Even when I meet people who are angry about my company (or service/ product), I hesitate to defend the company". Exchange norms were measured using 5-item scale of Lee and Chon (2021). It covered items like "If nothing would be gained, I would stop making efforts for my organization". The PO fit was operationalized using the Cable and Judge (1996) 3-item scale. it covered items like "My values match those of current employees in organization".

3.3 Control variables

Lee and Chon (2021) and Lee (2022) recommended that employee education, organization type, job level and experience should be controlled while assessing their communication behavior. Therefore, the current study controlled all these variables.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary analysis

Before hypotheses testing, the preliminary analysis was carried out. It covered reliability assessment, normality, descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients. The normality was assessed using the skewness and kurtosis ranges (i.e. -1.00 to +1.00) (Lee, 2021). Based on these thresholds the data was found normally distributed. The reliability was established as the calculated values were above the Cronbach's alpha threshold of $\geq$ 0.70 (Babbie, 1992). We used the Podsakoff et al., (2012) guidelines to address the issue of Common Method Variance (CMV). The methodology approach of time-lagged approach was based on these guidelines. Furthermore, we used Harman's single factor score to judge the explanation of variance. The results highlighted that the single factor model explained only 30.175% (<50%), thus signifying that the CMV issue was not present.

After data preparation tests, the CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) was carried out. We used threshold of Hair et al., (2010) for factor loadings (i.e. $\geq$0.50), Average Variance Extracted (AVE, $\geq$0.50) and Composite Reliability (CR, $\geq$0.60). The model fitness threshold of Williams et al., (2015) were also used. The four-factor model showed the highest model fitness values (x^2/df=1.99, RMSEA=0.05, RMR=0.06, CFI=0.91). Table 4.1 highlights the results of CFA and validity. All the factors loaded with the acceptable values (0.51 – 0.88). Both the AVE and CR values were also above threshold values. The values of MSV and AVE highlight that the validity was established (table 4.1).

Table 4.1 CFA and Validity

		Loadings	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4	5
1	Inclusive leadership	0.51-0.67	0.803	0.52	0.407	**0.707**				
2	Exchange norms	0.60-0.88	0.849	0.55	0.418	0.495	**0.667**			
3	EVCB	0.57-0.81	0.805	0.56	0.409	0.374	0.510	**0.675**		
4	PO fit	0.56-0.79	0.903	0.53	0.492	0.504	0.507	0.341	**0.686**	

Moreover, the correlation results highlight positive association between variables of interest (table 4.2). For instance, inclusive leadership is positively related with exchange norms (r = .385; p<0.05) and EVCB (r =.207; p<0.01). Exchange norms are also related with the EVCB (r = .207; p<0.01) and PO fit (r = .104; p<0.05). These results highlight that the choice of variables of interests is justified and we may move with the hypotheses testing.

positive and significant (β = 0.13, p < 0.01), thus H2 was also supported. As both the direct and indirect paths were significant, the partial mediation is supported.

The results for moderation analysis are shown in table 4.4. The moderation was tested with help of interaction of inclusive leadership and PO fit (IL×PO fit). The results reveal that the inclusive leadership is positively related with EVCB (the outcome variable; β = 0.26, p < 0.05), while the moderator is not significantly

Table 4.2 Descriptive and Correlation

	N=312		Mean (SD)	∞	1	2	3	4	5
1	Inclusive leadership		3.81 (0.706)	.801	-				
2	Exchange norms		3.54 (0.729)	.889	.385*	-			
3	EVCB		4.01 (0.668)	.837	.207**	.305**	-		
4	PO fit		4.11 (0.706)	.894	.104*	.202*			
*p<.05, **p<.01									

4.2 Hypotheses testing

Table 4.3 covers the hypotheses testing results. The results divulge that H1 is supported as inclusive leadership is positively related with EVCB (β = 0.26, p < 0.05). The results also reveal that exchange norms are related with both the inclusive leadership (β = 0.41, p < 0.01) and EVCB (β = 0.64, p < 0.01). These results help us believe that the mediation mechanism exists. In order to have a robust view of the same, the indirect path was

related with the EVCB (β = 0.11, p < 0.107). As the moderator was not significant the interaction was also insignificant (β = 0.09, p < 0.141), thus H3 was not supported.

5. Discussion

Building on OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986) this research endeavor empirically investigates the mechanism of improving EVCB. The study considers the role of inclusive leadership, exchange norms and PO fit to predict EVCB.

Table 4.3 Hypotheses testing results

Relationships	B	SE	t-value	Bootstraps @ 95%		P
				LLCI	ULCI	
IL → EVCB	0.26	0.048	5.394	0.542	0.759	0.012
IL → EN	0.41	0.049	8.452	0.651	0.827	0.005
EN → EVCB	0.31	0.047	6.578	0.617	0.834	0.020
Indirect effect						
IL → EN → EVCB	0.13	0.031	4.189	0.307	0.495	0.001

Notes: UL = upper limit, LL = lower limit, CI = confidence interval, Bootstrap sample size 5,000
IL = Inclusive Leadership; EVCB=Employee Voluntary Communication Behavior; EN=Exchange Norms

Table 4.4 Moderation analysis

Relationships	B	SE	t-value	Bootstraps @ 95%		p
				LLCI	ULCI	
Interactive model: EVCB as DV						
IL	0.26	0.048	5.394	0.542	0.759	0.012
PO fit	0.11	0.287	0.665	0.148	-0.385	0.107
Interactional term						
IL× PO fit	0.09	0.089	0.101	-0.374	0.507	0.141

assessed at bootstraps at 5000 re-samples. The indirect path (via exchange norms) was also

The statistical analysis supports the assumptions that in presence of inclusive

leadership employees would indulge in VCB. Previously, Ahmed et al., (2023) and Lee (2022) observed that employee communication is largely influenced by the organizational factors and especially the leadership. The findings are important for cultures like Pakistan which is attributed to be collectivist and where the communication is important way to build a shared perception about individuals, groups and organizations (Ahmed and Riaz, 2024).

The results further highlight that exchange norms partially mediation the said relationship, which supports the study H2. Though there was dearth of literature proposing and testing this mediation mechanism, but the relationship had been proposed on the basis of OST. The empirical findings support the same, therefore the relation is not both theoretically and empirically supported. On the other hand, some related studies have observed that exchange norms influence the employees' communication behavior. For instance, Lee and Chon (2021) observed that exchange relationship leads to information sharing behavior (scouting). On the other hand, Men et al., (2023), Men and Sung (2022) and Wang (2023) also observed that the information seeking behaviors also increase when there is higher level of exchange norms. The current study moves a step ahead, by assuming and empirically supporting the fact that inclusive leadership can improve communication behavior by increasing exchange norms. Therefore, the study proves that OST is a good theoretical fit in communication literature.

The study has also proposed and empirically tested the moderating role of PO fit. There was no study found that has proposed or investigated the moderating role of PO fit between inclusive leadership and EVCB. The current study proposed this relationship but the same is not empirically supported. This could be attributed to many reasons. For instance, the sample characteristics could be one of the reasons. As the average experience of job was 3.75 years, which may not be a good-enough tenure to embed with the organizational culture and values. Though the mean score highlighted that the employees perceived a fit with their organization, but it could be attributed to the few of the respondents. Additionally, the higher level of turnover and self-employment trends in IT firms (Ahmed et al., 2024), may also be a hinderance that may not let anyone feel fit with the employer.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study are equally useful for theory and practice. Theoretically, this study uses the lens of OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986) in proposing the relationship of inclusive leadership and EVCB through exchange norms and in presence of conditional effects of PO fit. The results support the assertions made through OST and highlight that the when inclusive leader shows the traits of openness and availability to employees, they tend to consider it an offering from the organization. This perception leads to formation of exchange relationship, which bounds employees to reciprocate their employer positively (Ahmed and Nawaz, 2015). The same has been empirically supported by the current study. Theoretically, it is inferred that inclusive leaders, through openness, recognizing others, accepting failures and idea sharing propensities, are considered a positive aspect of leadership which influences employees at psychological levels (Mitchells et al., 2015). In reciprocation to the same EVCB surges (Hung, 2005; Lee and Chon, 2021; Lee and Kim, 2017; Verhoeven and Madsen, 2022; Zhou and Xu, 2022). The non-supportive findings about the moderation of PO fit yet offer an area that needs further investigation, thus proposing a new research topic for the researchers.

Along with the theorical contributions, the current study also offers some insights for the managers. The foremost is the ways of improving EVCB. The study highlights that if employees should be influence at psychological level and employees should be given a positive workplace, like leadership (Ahmed et al., 2024). Here the study highlights a new offering in terms of inclusive leadership. The managers should try to adopt inclusive approach as it influences employees at psychological levels and makes them communicate positively. The management should also hire those employees who are good team players, like to be open, and have inclusive approach. Similarly, training could be arranged to increase the inclusiveness and the culture could be nourished where the inclusiveness becomes a norm.

6.3 Limitations and future directions

The study is prone to some limitations as well, where the foremost is the choice of only one positive aspect of leadership. The leadership literature highlights that leadership is divided into traits, behaviors, approaches and styles. The future researchers could move with other leadership styles (e.g. empowering, paradoxical, and entrepreneurial leadership). Negative leadership behaviors and styles have also gained researchers' attention, so the researchers should study the communication behavior when a leader is negative (e.g. narcissist, despotic, and abusive). Other organizational factors (e.g. corporate social responsibility) can also influence employee outcomes (Chan et al., 2023), therefore future studies can consider CSR and its influence on EVCB. As employee performance increases overall organizational performance (Jain et al., 2023), the outcomes of EVCB should also be investigated. The consideration of exchange norms is well-backed by the OST, while change in theoretical lens may change the explanatory mechanism. Future researchers should consider other explanatory mechanisms and theoretical lens.

The current study has some methodological limitations as well. Future studies should consider studying the communication in time-series, as the routine events may change the communication behaviors. The future studies should also use larger sample size, to have robust results. Other organizations (e.g. educational and health) could be considered for investigation. Even the multi-sampling could be a good option to fetch vigorous outcomes.

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