

Developing an Inclusive Leadership-Psychological Safety Relationship Framework to Foster Creative Performance in the Nigerian Built Environment

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Abstract

Construction employees over the years have been exposed to risky, complex and uncertain workplace environment due to the multitasking nature of construction works. Thus, innovative ideas are needed in a leader-member relationship on construction projects, in order to improve productivity. However, managers are often faced with challenges of developing high level of inclusiveness and how to incorporate members' creative ideas, which could eventually jeopardize psychological safety, with consequent low productivity at workplace. In light of this, this paper attempts to develop an inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship framework to enhance creative behavior in the built environment. Using a conceptual approach, the study reviewed literature on inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and the attributes of inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship in promoting employee creative behavior. By reviewing 39 articles and citing 18 secondary sources, the key features/elements of inclusive leadership and psychological safety relationship were extracted to develop the framework. The study established that key elements of inclusive leadership-psychological safety such as inclusion, openness, commitment to diversity, awareness to bias, learning culture, supportive feedback, trust and respect among others are essential in achieving belongingness, and supportive climate in the construction workplace. This framework provides direction in fostering creative behavior within construction workforce, thereby improving organizational productivity.

Keywords: Construction, Creativity, Inclusive Leadership, Nigeria, Psychological Safety.

1. Introduction

An organization workforce is best described through the nature of its workplace environment. In essence, the workplace is essential to facilitate and promote the objectives of an organization and its workforce. The workplace environment refers to the physical settings, situations, culture, job profile, market conditions and the environment in which people work (Briner, 2000; Tripathi, 2014 & Oludeyi, 2015). It defines an environment in which individuals undertake their designated tasks and responsibilities within an organization. In the construction industry, the workplace is quite unique and distinct due to the complexity and risky nature of construction works, coupled with the existence of separate disciplines and separate work environments in the construction industry. Hence, leadership is essential in the built environment to give directions both in construction projects implementation and in administrative procedures. According to Vidya (2011) and Rani *et al*, (2022), certain critical factors such as motivation, psychological safety/well-being, and leadership among others are required to effectively manage complex workplace environment such as construction industry. An organization leadership style is identified as one of the key factors to either enhance or retard the interest, behaviors, commitment of employees in an organization (Velu *et al*, 2017). In recent times,

inclusive leadership is found useful in promoting organization productivity and employee creative behavior. According to Carmeli; *et al* (2010), Randel *et al* (2017) and Qi *et al* (2019), inclusive leadership is found to exhibit vital attributes such as inclusion, availability, accessibility, openness, uniqueness, valuing diverse perspectives, equity, belongingness and support for creativity, that are needed to promote employee creative behavior and psychological safety. It creates a positive and psychologically safe workplace environment where employees feel valued, respected and included (Ferdman, 2014; Zeng *et al*; 2020). Which in turn affirms the relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological safety in managing complex and multifaceted workplace environment, such as the construction industry. The inclusive leadership concept is beneficial in workplace climate, to groom innovative leaders for the sustainable development and implementation of construction projects. The absence of framework to promote and foster inclusiveness, psychological safety and creative behavior in leader-member relationship at workplace in the built environment has necessitated the study. It is acknowledged that the leadership style in workplace environment is significant to influence creative behavior in an organization workforce. This study therefore develops a framework to foster construction employee creative behavior.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Inclusive Leadership

In management field, effective management requires a set of skills like planning, communication, organization and leadership style, in order to attain improve performance at workplace environment (Jennifer, 2023). Different forms of leadership dimensions have been studied such as transformational leadership, shared leadership, benevolent leadership, moral leadership, humble leadership, transactional leadership and relational/inclusive leadership (Carneli *et al.*, 2010, Sun *et al.*, 2016; Wang & Chang, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2018 & Naqvi *et al.*, 2017). These forms of leadership are evolving in response to actual situations in most organizations, with varying degree of outcomes. According to Carneli *et al.*, (2010), Uhl-Bien, (2006) and Fletcher, (2004) inclusive leadership is described as one of the emerging concepts in the study of leadership. Inclusive leadership is distinct from other mode of leadership in the sense that it creates an avenue for followers to air their views and opinions in creative manner provided the leaders demonstrate high level of inclusiveness. It emphasizes the values of diversity and active involvement of all team members in promoting creativity in teams (Nembhand & Edmondson, 2016). Construction activities are characterized by urgency to deliver construction projects before deadline dates. Timelines are set for each task which in turn put immense pressure on construction workers, particularly the construction managers. In this regard, there is tendency for toxic work environment which could result in low level inclusiveness and lack of psychological safety among construction workers. Nevertheless, psychological safety through inclusive leadership is still critical because people are allowed to speak up about their concerns, provide feedbacks about their operations and reduce potential errors (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Primarily, inclusive leadership style is conceived to produce inclusive leaders with peculiar attributes and impacts that are needed to lead actively. The inclusive leader attributes are significant to demonstrate inclusion, belongingness, and uniqueness, with consequent impacts on employee/subordinates' creative behavior and psychological safety in the workplace. As highlighted in Fagan *et al.*, (2022), inclusive leaders are expected to demonstrate certain attributes such as "authentic leadership, change maker, collaborative, commitment to diversity and cultural competency, ideals, offer followers support and openness". These in turn increased psychological safety, follower well-being, creativity, increased follower productivity, performance and work engagement, increased trustworthiness in leader-follower relationship, together with follower motivation to get involved and produce results (Fagan *et al.*, 2022). In Nigeria, a study of inclusive leadership and employee work engagement in hospital setting by Babaita *et al.*, (2023) revealed the significance of

inclusive leadership key elements such as accessibility and openness in fostering open discussion and enabling inclusive workplace environment within work teams, regardless of diverse background.

2.2. Psychological Safety (P.S)

The concept of psychological safety is beginning to gain wider interest in the construction industry. P. S is a common factor that drives employee creativity in an organization (Gong *et al.*, 2012 & Liu *et al.*, 2020). The applicability of the concept of psychological safety in the construction industry is still an on-going development (Gomez *et al.*, 2019), while its usefulness and outcomes have been studied in different sectors such as education, healthcare, manufacturing and information technology (Kessel *et al.*, 2012; Turner & Harder 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2011 & Bergmann & Schaeppi, 2016). According to Edmondson (2018), psychological safety is the belief or perception by an employee that he or she will not be punished or humiliated in a workplace when different creative ideas, questions or concerns are being shared. In attaining organizational success, P.S encourages openness, making use of creative chances by working together, thereby leading to improved productivity and problem-solving abilities within the workforce (Khalid & Saqali, 2023). By reviewing the antecedents and outcomes of psychology safety, Newman *et al.*, (2017) highlighted the factors that influences the way employee perceived psychological safety to include leader inclusiveness, support, trustworthiness (trust in the leader), openness, and behavioral integrity. These perceptions of psychological safety are noticeable both at individual and team levels. Psychological safety was identified as the topmost characteristic of an impactful work teams by reducing team member's error, and enhancing safety (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011; Leroy *et al.*, 2012; Bergmann & Schaeppi, 2016). According to Hallam *et al.* (2023), a psychologically safe workplace is achieved through certain key elements such as effective communication, organizational culture, leadership practices, performance feedback mechanisms, respect among colleagues, staff development opportunities, teamwork and trust. The impact and significance of psychological safety in the construction workplace are crucial to denote employee creative behaviour in a risky workplace environment. The psychological safety climate in the construction industry has been examined through four dimensions, which are management support, management priority, organizational communication, and organizational participation (Xie *et al.* 2020). The comparison of the level of psychological safety both in megaprojects and ordinary projects showed a higher level of psychological safety climate in megaprojects when compared to ordinary projects (Xie *et al.* 2020). Similarly, the impact of psychological safety is positively reflected in lean construction when compared to traditional construction projects (Demirkesen *et al.*, 2021).

2.3. Inclusive Leadership - Psychological Safety Relationship

Studies have shown the significance of inclusive leadership to sustain the value of diversity, the active involvement of all team members, and to positively influence team creativity (Leung *et al.*, 2015; Roberson, 2016; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2016; European Commission, 2017 & Bakkes, 2023). Inclusive leaders are known to exhibit certain traits such as thriving in a diverse new world, cognizance, curiosity, cultural intelligence, collaboration, commitment, and courage (Bourke & Dillon, 2016). Other noticeable inclusive leadership traits include humility, respect, authenticity, openness, tolerance for ambiguity, vulnerability, and integrity (Ferdman, 2014; Moore *et al.*, 2020 & Wasserman, 2020). In essence, inclusive leadership promotes a sense of psychological safety, encourages diverse perspectives and facilitates open communication (Bakkes, 2023). The psychological safety (PS) of an employee is important to ascertain the degree at which they can make contributions at workplace environment. P.S could impact the state of wellbeing of an employee. A psychologically safe employee has the tendency to display better wellbeing, unlike an employee facing poor psychological safety. According to Ilies *et al.*, (2010) “not being able to speak up can lead to work-related stress, which can incubate this problem and lead to more significant health problems farther down the line”. Inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship is essential to curb workplace challenges. The relationship is characterized by supportive climate, openness, accessibility and availability, courage to speak up, with creative ideas and novel put, openness to experience and motivation, conducive and nontoxic workplace environment, an atmosphere of trust and open communication, among others (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Carmeli *et al.*, 2013 & Mavrokordatos, 2015). As revealed by Bourke and Espedido (2020), in inclusive leadership – psychological safety relationship, 70% of an inclusive leader actions make the difference in determining whether an individual reports feeling included in an organization. It is noted that the inclusive leader influence is aided by certain inclusive leadership key traits such as visible commitment to valuing diversity, humility, awareness of bias (main key to inclusiveness), curiosity about others, cultural intelligence and effective collaboration (Bourke & Espedido (2020).

2.4. Leadership style in the construction industry

Leadership in the construction industry has been assessed through different perspectives. It is an emerging issue in the built environment that has been subjected to intense debate in recent time (CIOB, 2008). In construction, leadership is about people, places and events (Chan, 2008). According to Ali *et al.*; (2020) leadership styles are required due to the complex nature of construction projects, to promote

creative performance and attaining project success. In particular, the effective leadership style enables the workforce to achieve project goals through novel and creative idea (Wu *et al.*; 2018 & Li *et al.*; 2020). It is noted that the lack of leadership and /or inadequate essential leadership style by construction managers in project-based organizations decelerated the growth and sustainability of the built environment (CIOB, 2008; Ismail & Fathi, 2018). In attaining construction project success, the construction manager leadership style is found critical (Goleman, 2002). Most especially when construction managers deploy suitable leader style in a given situation (Liphadzi *et al* 2015). Studies such as Giritli and Oraz (2004), Akhila (2018), Ismail and Fathi (2018), Emere *et al* (2018), Kalambay *et al.*, (2021) and Liphadzi, (2015) among others have found the impact, and the common leadership styles in the construction industry across different countries. To mention a few, the following are the common leadership styles in the construction industry: laissez-Faire and transformational leadership (India), authoritative (Turkey), democratic, transformational and transactional leadership (South Africa), strategic, democratic, charismatic and transformational (United Kingdom), transformational and transactional leadership style (China and Ghana). Some similar leadership styles are also manifesting in the Nigerian built environment. Notably among them are autocratic (Oke, 2013), goal oriented, relationship, technical, team style and task/autocratic (Odediran & Babalola, 2015), democratic and autocratic leadership style (Ayangade *et al.*; (2017), transformational, transactional and Laissez-Faire leadership style (Oyetunji *et al.*; 2019), and democratic, strategic, transformational, peace setting and facilitative leadership styles (Mesoma, 2022) among others. Similar to the findings of Liphadzi (2015) in South Africa and Akhila (2018) in India, the Laissaez-Faire leadership style is negatively correlated with construction worker performance in Nigeria (Oyetunji *et al.*; 2019), while the autocratic leadership style is described as the predominant, and mostly not preferred leadership style in the Nigerian built environment (Oke 2013 & Mesoma, 2022). Broaden views on leadership styles in the built environment have identified inclusive leadership as an important leadership style. Inclusive leadership is identified to have positive impacts on project success (Rehman, 2020 and Khan *et al.*, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study reviewed published literature on inclusive leadership and psychological safety to established their relationship. Data collection was done by reviewing related literature sourced from the internet and online databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Emerald and Academia, by using the research topic keywords such as inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and creativity with no year limitation. 56 (fifty-six) academic resources were

initially downloaded, out of which 39 academic resources were considered for review, based on the relevance of their core contents. Additional, 18 secondary sources were also referenced from the identified academic resources. The academic resources include journal articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, and research thesis. These resources are basically in English language. The review considered the findings of studies on inclusive leadership and psychological safety in the workplace, in different sectors such as construction, health, tourism, education among others. The selected academic resources were read, classified, and analyzed using content analysis to quantify the occurrence of key features/elements of inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship in fostering creative behavior in the workplace. The findings of the impact of inclusive leadership on workplace environment both in Nigeria and overseas were considered in developing the framework.

4. Results and Discussion

The review of literature on inclusive leadership revealed key features that are essential in fostering employee creativity and psychological safety in the built environment. These key features of inclusive leadership include openness/availability/accessibility, inclusion, commitment to diversity, awareness of bias, and cultural intelligence. These findings formed the basis for facilitating inclusion within a diverse workplace. A psychologically safe workplace is evident where learning culture, open communication, supportive feedback, supportive interpersonal relationships, trust, and respect are noticeable. In the construction industry, the risky nature of tasks requires an enabling environment where inclusiveness acts as the main driving force in fostering creative behavior and ensuring psychological safety. Having a psychologically safe workplace in the construction industry is essential to improve productivity and reduce occupational health and safety risks (Demirkesen *et al.*, 2021). According to Howell *et al.* (2017) and Edmondson (2018), there exists a positive impact of open communication, mutual respect, and trust in promoting psychological safety and creativity in construction projects. These findings suggest a high-quality relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological safety in fostering employee creative behavior in the construction industry.

4.1. Framework to Foster Construction Employee Creative Behavior

In relation to the aim of this study, a framework was developed to foster creative behavior in the construction workplace environment. The key features of inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship were instrumental in the development of the framework (figure 1). In inclusive leadership style, certain features such as inclusion, availability, awareness of bias, commitment to diversity provides

the leverage to attaining learning culture, effective communication, trust and respect, which are embedded in a psychologically safe workplace environment. The effectiveness of the inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship is manifested through supportive climate, belongingness, conducive and nontoxic working environment. More importantly, the key features of inclusive leadership greatly influenced construction managers to lead by example, while the subordinates value individual differences and practice inclusion by working together. The resultant features of these relationships enhanced construction employee creative behavior in the workplace environment.

As depicted in figure 1, both the inclusive leadership and psychology safety are in interactive relationship through their respective elements, such as inclusion, openness, availability, accessibility, commitment to diversity, a learning culture, open communication, supportive feedback etc., which in turn produce resultant features such as supportive climate, belongingness, courage to speak up with creative ideas and novel input etc. The framework also depicts the role of inclusive leadership in influencing construction managers to lead by example, by championing inclusion in the workplace, commitment to workforce diversity in the organization and openness to ideas. The inclusive construction manager is positioned to influence the subordinates/members to value individual differences, take personal responsibility, and practice inclusion by working together. The leader-follower inclusive practices contribute to the overall resultant features, which in turn lead to enhanced construction employee creative behavior in the workplace environment.

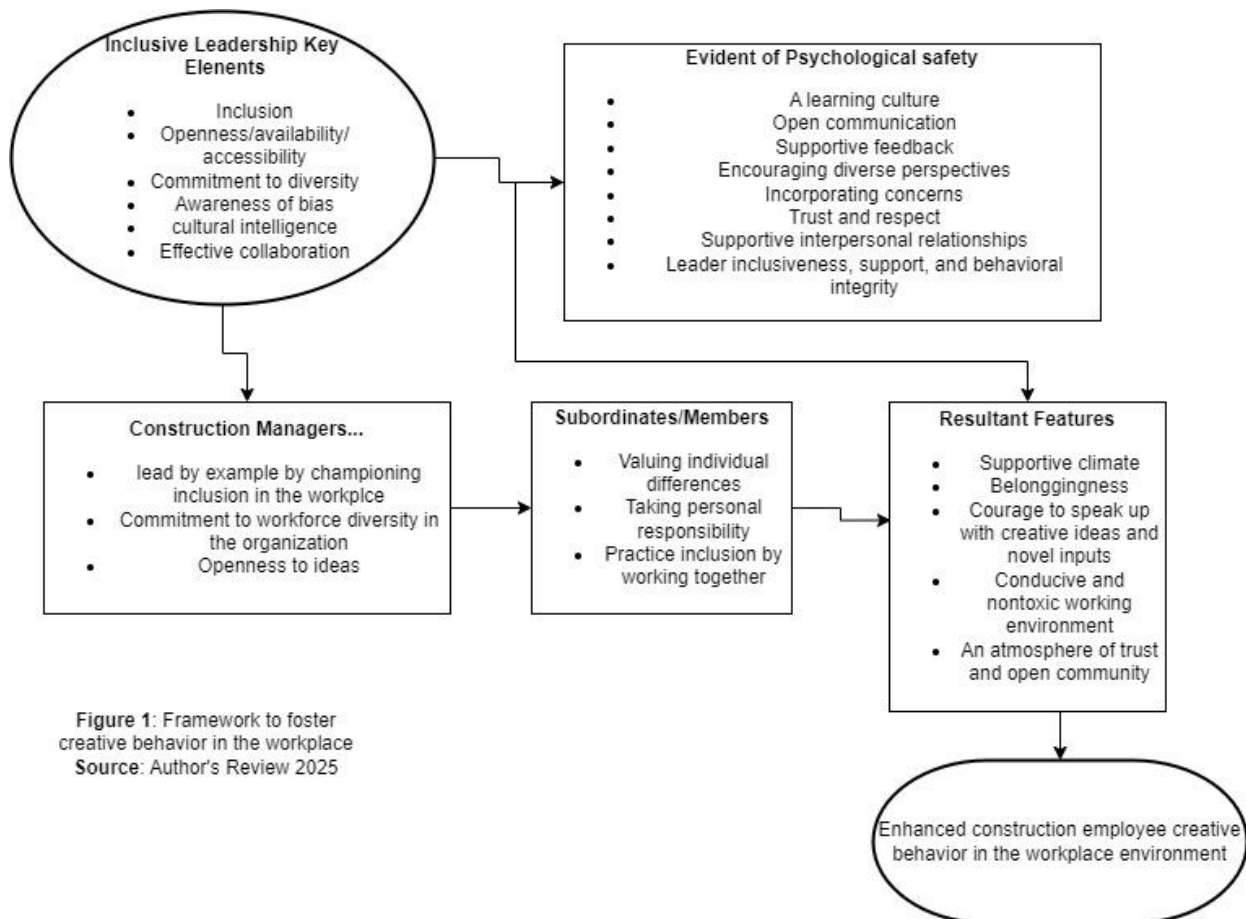


Figure 1: Framework to foster creative behavior in the workplace
Source: Author's Review 2025

Figure 1: Framework to Foster Creative Behaviour in the Workplace
Source: Author's Review 2025

5. Conclusions

This study develops an inclusive leadership - psychological safety relationship framework through literature review. The study explored the interactive relationship of inclusive leadership and psychological safety in obtaining key resultant features of inclusive workplace environment. The framework demonstrates the expected outcomes when construction manager exhibits key inclusive leadership elements, which are fundamental in influencing employee/subordinate creative behavior in the construction workplace environment, and attaining organizational productivity. This present study only attempts to develop an inclusive leadership – psychology safety relationship framework through desktop analysis, which could limit the framework verification. Empirical studies are

needed in developing a well-structured inclusive leadership-psychological safety relationship framework, to enhance employee creative behavior in the Nigerian built environ.

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