Inclusive Leader Practices: Creating Energy, Confidence, And A Sense Of Value For Employees

Bejoy Philip

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Dana Kaminstein

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Abstract
This capstone is a qualitative exploratory research study that examines how leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments. Fifteen study participants representing four racial groups and four different industries were interviewed individually to better understand their inclusion experiences and how they were affected emotionally by inclusion/exclusion in the workplace. Themes from the research indicate that employees feel included when they experience having voice, when others see them as credible, and when they have friendly coactive relationships with their colleagues and leaders. Furthermore, the results of the study show that leaders with formal authority played an important role in creating inclusion experiences for their subordinates. Specifically, leaders who created voice space, conferred informal authority on employees, coached and developed employees, and built vulnerable and safe relationships, positively influenced the inclusion experience. Also, the study results suggest that inclusion affects employee motivational energy, self-confidence in a person's capability, and their sense of value and purpose.

Keywords
diversity, inclusion, voice, inclusive leadership, confidence, motivation

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INCLUSIVE LEADER PRACTICES:
CREATING ENERGY, CONFIDENCE, AND A SENSE OF VALUE FOR EMPLOYEES

by

Bejoy Philip

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in the School of Arts and Sciences
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University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2020
INCLUSIVE LEADER PRACTICES:

CREATING ENERGY, CONFIDENCE, AND A SENSE OF VALUE FOR EMPLOYEES

Approved By:

Dana Kaminstein, Ph.D., Advisor

Charline Russo, Ph.D., Reader
ABSTRACT

This capstone is a qualitative exploratory research study that examines how leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments. Fifteen study participants representing four racial groups and four different industries were interviewed individually to better understand their inclusion experiences and how they were affected emotionally by inclusion/exclusion in the workplace. Themes from the research indicate that employees feel included when they experience having voice, when others see them as credible, and when they have friendly coactive relationships with their colleagues and leaders. Furthermore, the results of the study show that leaders with formal authority played an important role in creating inclusion experiences for their subordinates. Specifically, leaders who created voice space, conferred informal authority on employees, coached and developed employees, and built vulnerable and safe relationships, positively influenced the inclusion experience. Also, the study results suggest that inclusion affects employee motivational energy, self-confidence in a person’s capability, and their sense of value and purpose.

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Capstone Focus

Over the past ten years, the focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives within companies has rapidly expanded. In fact, in a study done across 14 countries the research showed that 96-98% of large companies (above 1,000 employees) have D&I initiatives (Krentz, 2019).

The evolution of talent diversity practice started with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as part of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Shortly after, affirmative action plans began taking hold in the 1970’s. Workplace diversity initiatives evolved in the 90s and now there is an expanded emphasis on inclusion in our current day (Vaughn, 2007). More recently during the pandemic, societal context and heightened awareness of race, gender, and sexual orientation issues are driving companies to consider how to handle the diversity of the talent they recruit while also creating an inclusive organizational culture (Zheng, 2020).

So, how do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments? Through a survey of current literature and qualitative research, this research capstone explores the practices of team leaders that have a strong influence on the climate of inclusion within organizations.

Background: What is Inclusion?

The term “inclusion” in workplace practice is a more recent term and has been added to the traditional focus on diversity (Vaughn, 2007). Both diversity and inclusion are often associated but they are distinct constructs that have differing organizational
implications (Mor Barak, 2015). Diversity refers to demographic differences among members, including both observable (e.g., gender, race, age) and non-observable (e.g., culture, cognition, education) attributes (Mor Barak, 2015; Nishii, 2013; Roberson, 2006).

Different from diversity, inclusion is the degree to which employees feel their unique characteristics are valued and they are able to fully participate in organizational life (Mor Barak, 2015). Nishii writes, “Inclusion focuses on valuing organizational members for their unique characteristics and creating an atmosphere in which members can feel comfortable sharing their true selves” (Nishii, 2013). Given this definition, it is important to frame inclusion as a construct that measures the degree to which people maintain their uniqueness while still feeling they are part of the community and “in-group” (Buengeler et al. 2018). One assumption underlying this research capstone is that true diversity cannot manifest fully unless there is a climate of inclusion.

In contrast to the notion of assimilation, inclusion is about maintaining uniqueness while still being able to fully engage without the negative effects of in-group and out-group dynamics. The feeling of belonging with the majority in-group goes beyond a positive interpersonal friendship with colleagues. True inclusion in the workplace is having the influence and organizational status to access information, have direct impact on decisions, and be a part of the informal network of those with status and power (Mor Barak, 2014).

The concept of inclusion-exclusion in the workplace refers to the individual’s sense of being a part of the organizational system in both the formal processes, such as access to information and decision-making channels, and the informal
processes, such as “water cooler” and lunch meetings where information exchange and decisions informally take place. (Mor Barak, 2014, p. 155)

In short, inclusion is not merely achieving the racial heterogeneity metrics that diversity initiatives typically aim for. Inclusion is creating the environment for minority groups to be fully accepted for their unique characteristics while generating a real sense of belonging within the majority in-group as measured by the increase of influence, authority, and access.

Capstone Relevance

The Inclusion Challenge: Same Workplace Different Experience

Culture Amp, a leading culture research and engagement survey company, released a 2019 Diversity and Inclusion report highlighting the disparity in how under-represented groups perceive their organizational experience of inclusion compared to other majority groups. Table 1, below, presents some of the data in the report. It is clear that some of the drivers for inclusion like “voice”, “fairness”, and “decision making” are noticeably lower for under-represented populations. Another rising complexity highlighted in the research is the intersection of gender, race, sexual orientation, and family status. One can see the variety of populations that have a disparate experience from the majority.
Despite progress in increasing diversity in work organizations, it is the exclusion of groups from circles of influence that keeps them from fully benefiting from their involvement in the workplace (Mor Barak, 2015). Matt Krentz, head of D&I at Boston Consulting Group, says, “We know that diversity matters. In addition to being the right thing to strive for, having a diverse workforce helps companies acquire and retain the best talent, build employee engagement, increase innovation, and improve business performance. Yet corporate diversity still lags, especially at the top levels, which continue to be dominated by white, heterosexual men” (2019).
Business Relevance

How well leaders integrate inclusive strategies into their way of operating and their value system will be critical to achieving improved representation of minorities and an improved climate of inclusion (Buengeler et al. 2018). A plethora of business cases for D&I have been developed that bridge the need for employee equity with marketplace business results. In 2015 Josh Bersin commented on the D&I research saying, “We just completed a two-year research study (Bersin by Deloitte 2015 High-Impact Talent Management research) and the results are amazing: among more than 128 different practices we studied, the talent practices which predict the highest performing companies are all focused on building an Inclusive Talent System” (2015, pg. 1). From a business perspective, companies are linking performance, retention, trust, innovation, and creativity to diversity and the inclusion of perspectives (Roberson, 2006). From an employee standpoint, the positive perception of D&I within the workplace can drive increased trust and commitment (Roberson, 2006). Due to the potential for inclusion to positively impact the employee experience and business results, developing insight into the inclusive practices of leaders has relevance for today.

There are several reasons why this capstone is relevant and why the study of inclusive leadership is important:

1. Diversity and inclusion efforts in companies have become widespread.
2. Research on diversity and inclusion has indicated that these efforts have been largely unsuccessful either in creating a diverse workforce or in helping create equity in the experience of employees.
3. To date, little research has focused on what influences employees’ feelings of organizational inclusion.

4. One largely unexplored aspect of inclusion is how leaders of teams and organizations influence the degree to which employees’ feel included or excluded in their organizations.

How do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment? Exploring how leaders of teams and organizations influence employees’ feelings of inclusion or exclusion could add to our understanding of what can help organizations build a more inclusive environment.

Overview of Inclusion Literature

To date, existing research has defined inclusion primarily based on social group theories such as Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1979) and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991). These models establish the foundation for inclusion as a construct and assume that people desire to retain an optimal level of uniqueness while still belonging to a group. For example, Shore’s theoretical Inclusion Framework proposes that inclusion is when a person is valued for their uniqueness and treated as an “insider” (2011). Mor Barak, another prominent researcher of inclusion, describes inclusion as participating in organizational life through things like decision-making and having access to resources (1998). Existing research also connects theories such as Leader Member Exchange (LMX) (e.g. Brimhall et al. 2017) and Employee Voice Behavior (e.g. Carmeli et al. 2010) to better define and assess inclusive experiences.

However, even with these models, there is still limited understanding and detail about what leaders do to create the conditions for an inclusive climate and how
employees actually feel in response to inclusion. Existing models of leadership have been used (e.g. Authentic leadership) to conceptualize inclusive leader practices however there is no distinct inclusive leadership practice model.

Lastly, existing inclusion research is heavily based on survey methods derived from some of the foundational theories noted above and do not extensively look into the feelings of employees and the characteristics of their inclusion experiences. This capstone looks to explore inclusion and inclusive leaders from the stories and experience of employees rather than survey questions based on theoretical models. In Chapter 2, I further review the literature on inclusion and inclusive leadership.

**Methodology**

For this capstone, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with individuals from various race backgrounds, industries, companies, and work experiences to understand their experience of inclusion. Interviews were conducted through virtual video conferencing software (Zoom). The interviews were then transcribed, coded, and organized to determine themes. Interviewees were asked to voluntarily participate in the interviews.

This was a qualitative exploratory study and the data from the interviews are categorized into themes in Chapter 4 of this capstone. Themes were considered relevant if they were found in more than eight of the interviews (over 50% of the interviews). Sub-themes were also categorized where appropriate to provide greater clarity and detail.

**Capstone Research Question & Assumptions**

How do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment? This is the primary research question for this capstone and there are several
assumptions that are important to consider. First, I assume in this research that inclusiveness is determined by what the employee feels and experiences. Though leaders and teams may demonstrate inclusive behaviors, it is assumed that inclusion ultimately depends on the employee feeling included. Second, the leader is assumed to have influence on the climate of the team through formal and informal authority. This study seeks to explore the practices of leaders and how they create inclusive experiences. It is assumed that leaders play an important role in influencing workplace climate and culture because of their role and position. Third, it is assumed that inclusion for this research is specific to the workplace environment and not all contexts. Though there may be applicability to other team environments, this capstone explores workplace inclusion.

**Positionality**

I approach this capstone research as a practitioner in the field of leadership and organizational development. I also have a role as a human resources executive within a large company (ACME). Currently, I hold some knowledge of the field of inclusion, and I am directly involved in the execution of inclusion strategies within my company. I’m also a participant in current inclusion training programs within ACME. Due to my role, I am specifically interested in understanding workplace experiences and how they drive inclusion. Due to my role as an HR executive, I wanted to better understand inclusive practices, and the role of leaders in inclusion, in order to influence and improve my work environment.

Inclusion is a key strategic priority within my company so I am very close to current initiatives focused on addressing inclusion issues. As you will see in the capstone research method, I have chosen not to focus only on my current company but to also
include those outside of my company to ensure the capstone is not overly influenced by my company experience. This will allow for some comparison across industries and will help mitigate my biases as an HR professional within a specific company.

Being an ethnic minority, I personally value equity in the workplace. I have not only experienced inclusion but also exclusionary moments that shaped me professionally and emotionally. I carry strong beliefs and values related to this capstone and inclusion is a very relevant topic to my own professional growth. This capstone allows me to better understand my personal experiences and response to inclusion in the workplace.

Capstone Overview & Outline

Human Resource Development approaches are still evolving to deal with difficult racial challenges in the workplace (Byrd, 2007). As you read the capstone research, consider the following questions:

- What does it feel like to be included?
- What is the nature of interaction with leaders in times of inclusion and exclusion?
- What are ways we can influence workplace climates to be more inclusive?

In Chapter 2, I begin with a literature review of key research that is relevant to this qualitative inclusion study. In Chapter 3, I provide a summary of the research method and how the resulting qualitative themes were derived. Chapter 4 provides the results and thematic analysis of the qualitative data. This capstone concludes in Chapter 5 with an interpretation of the results, how this capstone contributes to the body of inclusion research, limitations of the research, future research recommendations, practice implications, and personal reflections as the researcher.
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a literature review of some of the key issues covered in the inclusion research. Specifically, I focus on research areas that relate to the following primary capstone question: How do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment?

To date, I have reviewed a variety of literature and peer-review articles to assess the types of research conducted on the topic of inclusion and in particular inclusive leadership practices. This chapter will provide an overview of literature related to the following research areas:

- Defining and distinguishing inclusion from diversity
- Impact of Social & Leadership Categorization on inclusion
- Leader Member Exchange (LMX) and Voice impact on inclusion
- Impact of inclusion on business outcomes
- Existing models of leadership associated with inclusive climates

Defining and Distinguishing Inclusion

Various theoretical frames have been developed for conceptualizing inclusion and the experiences that individuals should have if an inclusive climate is present. For example, a tool for assessing inclusion is the “inclusion-exclusion” measurement survey developed by Mor Barak (1998). Mor Barak contributes to the research by defining the inclusion experience as the degree to which employees are integrated into organizational life. The measurement model, made up of 14 key attributes, assesses inclusion-exclusion...
from the standpoint of work group involvement, influence on decision-making, and access to communications and resources (1998). Mor Barak’s research also proposes that people assess their inclusion-exclusion experience at the work group level and the organizational levels:

From this notion, we propose that a person engages in an evaluation of his or her perception of inclusion-exclusion on two levels in any organization, at the work level and at the overall organization level. The inclusion-exclusion process can potentially be applied on both the micro, the work group level, and the macro, the organizational level. (1998, p. 51).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, diversity can be categorized as a measure of demographic differences, whereas inclusion is an experience of individuals within organizational group settings that involves self-identity (Nishii, 2013). To derive conceptual frames for inclusion, researchers have relied on several foundational social-psychological theories to underpin their constructs. Most notably are Social Identity Theory and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. These theories articulate the social and psychological needs of individuals within group settings that help conceptualize the inclusion-exclusion experience.

**Social Identity Theory**

Henri Tajfel is most notable for his research on intergroup dynamics and the development of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (1979). SIT posits that people develop a sense of who they are based on their group membership:

Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team etc.) that people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem.
Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. (Mcleod, 2019).

Based on Tajfel’s theory, people categorize others in social groups and also accentuate their similarities and dissimilarities to drive positive self-esteem for their respective in-group through a form of social comparison (Randel, 2017). This social categorization process helps us understand others and also understand our social environment. As one identifies as part of a particular group, one begins to associate with norms and prototypical traits of the group and undergoes a process of “depersonalization” (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In other words, their self-concept is now anchored to the profile of the group. It is important to note that membership in a group may be imposed, for example working in a particular work group, but social identity is a choice to develop a self-concept on the basis of in-group prototypical traits (Brewer, 1991).

Social identity rests on intergroup social comparisons that seek to confirm or to establish ingroup-favoring evaluative distinctiveness between in-group and out-group, motivated by an underlying need for self-esteem. (Hogg & Terry, 2000, pg. 122)

Self-categorization and the notion of prototypes within groups are important to the exploration of inclusion in organizational contexts. According to Hogg and Terry, people tend to look at certain individuals as stand out examples of a “fuzzy” set of prototypical traits (2000). This has potential implications for how a group views the norms of leadership, credibility, and competence. This formation of prototypes and categorization in turn can negatively exclude those who do not fit the traits of a particular group. For example, a minority who does not vacation in the same locations as a particular majority
group might be excluded as someone who does not carry the same prestige or sense of social class.

*Optimal Distinctiveness Theory*

Another key theory that is a foundation for inclusion research is Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991). Derived from Uniqueness Theory of Snyder and Fromkin (1980), ODT theorizes that individuals seek to find the right balance of belonging and uniqueness within groups:

My position is that social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other). (Brewer, 1991, pg. 477)

Brewer developed an ODT model (see Figure 1) and her research frames the complex experience of finding the right balance between maintaining uniqueness and assimilating to find in-group belonging. ODT theorizes that groups also must maintain a sense of uniqueness to survive and cannot be too large or too diverse. “Groups that become overly inclusive or ill-defined lose the loyalty of their membership or break up into factions or splinter groups” (1991).
From an organizational inclusion standpoint, ODT illuminates the underlying group dynamics that influence the experience of inclusion and exclusion. Can individuals who carry divergent traits truly belong and have status? To what degree are people able to participate as influencers if they are an anomaly from the majority?

To further explore inclusion in this respect, Shore et al. (2011) uses ODT to build a model for organizational inclusion and to further organize current and future research. Table 2 presents the framework.

**Table 2. Inclusion Framework**

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<th>Low Belongingness</th>
<th>High Belongingness</th>
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<td><strong>Low Value in Uniqueness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Exclusion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider</td>
<td>Individual is treated as an insider in the work group</td>
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with unique value in the
work group but there are
other employees or groups
who are insiders.

when they conform to
organizational/dominant
culture norms and
downplay uniqueness.

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<th>High Value in Uniqueness</th>
<th>Differentiation</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider in the work group but their unique characteristics are seen as valuable and required for group/organization success.</td>
<td>Individual is treated as an insider and also allowed/encouraged to retain uniqueness within the work group.</td>
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(Adapted from Shore, 2011)

According to this framework, it is possible that a group member is not considered an “insider” but still can participate to a degree of organizational life benefiting the group. However, the individual in turn does not have the same level of in-group influence and opportunities as others. True inclusion according to this framework only exists when a person’s uniqueness is retained and the person is treated as part of the in-group.

Uniqueness, according to Shore’s model, refers to a broad set of perspectives, knowledge, and traits (2011).

**Critique of Inclusion Frameworks**

The frameworks currently developed are helpful in pursuing inclusion research and provide a lens for further study of inclusion; however, they are still limited in understanding the personal experience of employees in professional settings. Social theories like SIT and ODT help in understanding the group dynamics that could potentially be present within organizations, but they do not necessarily address the unique experience of inclusion. For example, what are the traits that are typically deemed “out of the norm” during workplace social categorization? How do different contexts treat unique traits and why? Also, these theories represent the proposed intrinsic needs of individuals
and patterns of group social processes, but they do not address how a leader with positional authority creates a climate for inclusion. How can leaders facilitate group processes to mitigate negative effects of SIT? The theories of SIT and ODT provide insight into the dynamics that create inclusive/exclusive experience but do not provide insight into professional workplace strategies for leading inclusive climates explicitly.

Mor Barak’s assessment of inclusion is a good foundation for assessing workplace participation but does not address the “feeling” of inclusion from the perspective of those that have distinct uniqueness from majority norms. In survey instruments like the inclusion-exclusion scale, a degree of work involvement, decision-making, and resource access is assessed but not whether or not these items are important to the individual taking the instrument. The initial study group of social work students in field jobs (Mor Barak, 1998) is applicable but does not necessarily represent the experience levels in most corporations. It is possible that junior, mid-level, and tenured professionals have different degrees of workplace involvement needs. Again, inclusion is felt and experienced by employees. Many of the instruments that assess for inclusion traits do not necessarily assess how critical these workplace traits are to the experience of inclusion. For example, it is possible that an employee does not desire to be in a senior leadership position. It is also likely that being part of decision-making is not a core driver for feeling included for all individuals.

Shore’s model of inclusion (2011) provides an effective way for organizing inclusion research, particularly, the “contextual factors” that influence inclusion. According to Shore, inclusive climates, inclusive leadership, and inclusive practices are all aspects that require further study and exploration (2011). My assumption is that
without inclusive leaders, inclusive climates and practices cannot be established. For this capstone, I not only seek to understand how employees experience inclusion, but in particular, the role of leadership practice in shaping the inclusion. Shore’s model references inclusion experiences based on existing research (e.g. asking people to participate and share ideas) but I argue that the model does not articulate a clear set of leader practices that shape inclusion experiences. Furthermore, many of the models, including Shore’s, underscore the importance of being valued. However, they do not demonstrate clearly how someone is valued in the workplace in actionable terms. Being valued is a result but the antecedent experiences have room to be further defined.

There is limited research on the behavioral patterns and intentional practices of inclusive leaders and the resulting impacts on an inclusive organizational climate. The writers of *Inclusive leadership: Realizing positive outcomes through belongingness and being valued for uniqueness* establish a model connecting inclusive leader behavioral traits, resulting inclusive practices, and work group inclusion climate outcomes at a conceptual level based on existing research (Randel-Kedharnath, et al., 2018). However, the model does not investigate actual observed or qualitatively assessed practices in the workplace environment. Moreover, there is limited research on how to develop team leaders to accelerate their ability to build inclusive environments. Mor Barak, a significant researcher in the area of D&I, says, “More work is needed for us to more deeply understand the construct of inclusion and to draw linkages that will support evidence-based practice to create and sustain climates of inclusion in organizations” (Mor Barak, 2015, p. 84).

In this section, theoretical models for inclusion were reviewed as a foundation for
this capstone. The models help define and distinguish inclusion from diversity. They also provide a basis for the capstone research. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of social categorization as a barrier to inclusion.

**Social & Leadership Categorization Risks to Inclusion**

Though efforts to improve D&I have led to some improvement in representation, racial differences within groups and teams can be sources of conflict impeding the inclusion of racial minorities (Byrd, 2007). One of the core sociological challenges within organizations is the very present practice of homophily within companies. In other words, people tend to prefer to interact with similar rather than dissimilar people (Kearney & Gebert, 2009) and differences can actually lead to negative perceptions, in turn creating social categorization (Mitchell et al. 2015). Those that are considered part of the out-group due to their differences, are consciously and unconsciously treated less favorably (Kearney & Gebert, 2009, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Following from the theory of intergroup bias, this process of social categorization leads members within a social group, termed the in-group, to share trusting and positive relationships while members of other social groups, often labeled the out-group, are alienated and vilified. (Mitchell et al. 2015 as cited in, Tajfel, 1982; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998)

One of the more prevalent issues facing D&I is the measurable gap of racial and ethnic minorities in leadership (Rosette et al. 2008). Following the research of social categorization and intergroup bias, there is strong evidence to suggest that leaders and employees carry a mental model of what leadership is—a form of leadership categorization.
Empirical work supports this prototype development process. Through repeated interactions with examples of a given category, individuals have been shown to abstract characteristics from these observed examples to develop a prototype (Lord, Foti, & de Vader, 1984; Rosch & Mervis, 1975). We posit that the exemplars of leaders to which individuals are exposed are likely to be White, and thus, when individuals abstract attributes that are common to examples of business leaders but are perhaps less common to examples of non-leaders, they will conclude that the average leader, the prototypical leader, must be White. (Rosette et al. 2008)

If inclusion is a sense of maintained uniqueness along with merit-based participation, assumptions drawn from social and leadership categorization are a true threat to inclusion outcomes.

Assimilating to established majority “culture” characteristics could dilute a sense of uniqueness in under-represented groups. However, unique characteristics, especially those that are observable, can become the barrier to gaining status and influence within organizations (e.g. high performance appraisal, promotions, positions in leadership).

“Several studies have shown that the fit of individuals’ characteristics to evaluators’ leadership prototypes affects leadership perceptions and leadership ratings across several domains, including gender” (Rosette et al. 2008 as cited in, Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Schein, 1973; Scott). It is therefore very possible, and often the case, that there are pockets of observable diversity in the workplace but a gross underrepresentation of diversity in leadership positions with true formal and informal authority (Rosette et al.
In this section, social categorization was introduced as a potential barrier to inclusion and inclusion outcomes. In the next section, Leader Member Exchange and Employee Voice behavior are examined as experiences that influence inclusion.

**Leader Member Exchange & Employee Voice Influence on Inclusion**

*Leader member exchange (LMX)*

Leader Member Exchange (LMX) is one theory within the research that is related to the study of inclusive leadership.

LMX theory posits that differential social exchange relationships exist between leaders and their subordinates. The quality of the exchange relationship developed between leaders and subordinates contributes to subordinate outcomes. The primary process by which LMX is associated with subordinate outcomes is the norm of reciprocity, incorporated from social exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The norm of reciprocity suggests that individuals experience a sense of obligation to respond in kind and return the treatment they receive from others (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003; Wayne et al., 2002). (Stewart, 2009, pg 510)

As noted above, LMX is all about the relationship of leaders with their subordinates. LMX research in the context of inclusion focuses on the quality of leader and member interactions and resulting perceptions of inclusion (Brimhall et al. 2017).

At the heart of inclusion is the concept of trust, which can be defined as a psychological state of vulnerability based on expecting the positive intentions from others (Downey et al. 2015). Team climates that are perceived to be highly inclusive cultivate a
stronger sense of trust and commitment. People leaders or managers hold a significant role in developing inclusiveness in a team leading to high trust environments through the quality of interactions they have with team members (Brimhall et al. 2017). Scandura & Graen (1984) used the LMX-7 questionnaire in their research and were able to identify correlations between LMX relationship quality, response to leadership interventions, and improved employee outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction, productivity). The questionnaire included the following questions in listed in Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. LMX-7 Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you usually know how satisfied your immediate supervisor is with what you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How well do you feel that your immediate supervisor understands your problems and needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How well do you feel that your immediate supervisor recognizes your potential?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Regardless of how much formal authority your immediate supervisor has built into his or her position, what are the chances that he or she would be personally inclined to use power to help you solve problems in your work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Regardless of the amount of formal authority your immediate supervisor has, to what extent can you count on him or her to “bail you out” at his or her expense when you really need it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I have enough confidence in my immediate supervisor that I would defend and justify his or her decisions if he or she were not present to do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How would characterize your working relationship with your immediate supervisor?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Scandura and Graen, 1984)

Going beyond the dyadic relationship between leader and respective subordinates, LMX research is also extending to the work group level (Stewart, 2009). As Sherony and Green demonstrated in their research, the extent to which coworkers experience similar levels of LMX relationships with a leader is associated with the quality of relationship between those coworkers (2002). Stewart posits that LMX differentiation can lead to in-group and out-group perceptions between work group members in similarly high and low quality LMX relationships (2009). In other words, how a leader interacts with a team
member can influence how the group views that team member as either part of an in-group or out-group.

*Employee Voice*

Employee voice behavior is also associated with healthy LMX relationships between leaders and team members. Voice behavior is described as the voluntary communication of ideas, recommendations, concerns, or other work-related opinions (Weiss, 2018). Carmeli studied inclusive leadership and used a survey instrument to measure the degree of “openness, accessibility, and availability in their interactions with followers” (Carmeli et al. 2010, p.250). These behaviors help create a climate where employees feel their voices are valued and heard (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). The ability to speak up, especially with those in authority, is a critical part of voice behavior, and it also is an important part of an inclusive relationship with leaders. Speaking up is also more commonly associated with challenging the actions and opinions of those further up in the hierarchy (Weiss, 2018). As mentioned earlier in the case for inclusion research, the having voice in an organization varies among employee populations.

Beyond the trust created between leaders and team members, the ability to express voice behavior is evident when individuals feel safe psychologically (Edmondson, 2004). One key business outcome from the expression of ideas and the willingness to challenge the status quo is creativity (Carmeli, 2010). Business outcomes, like creativity, that are correlated with inclusion are discussed in the next section.

Leader Member Exchange and Employee Voice are significant experiences related to the study of inclusion and have possible implications for the practices that inclusive leaders should demonstrate. In the next, section I provide a review of specific
business outcomes associated with inclusion. Specifically, I focus on retention of employees and innovation/creativity.

Correlation of Inclusion to Business Outcomes

A plethora of research has been conducted to connect inclusive environments to business outcomes. Among the various articles focused on business outcomes related to inclusion, much of the research explores retention of employees, creativity, and innovation as common business outcomes. In this section, I share a brief summary of research related to these outcomes.

Retention

Retention, often called turnover of employees, is a business outcome measured in LMX and inclusion research. Nishii and Mayer (2009) conducted research to examine how differences in LMX relationships within a diverse work group correlated to employee retention. They concluded that turnover is higher in diverse groups in which leaders develop relationships that vary in quality among the team, as compared with groups in which leaders develop relationships of similar quality. Hur studied the affect of diversity on police department outcomes and, using data from 464 police departments, found decreased crime control performance and increased employee turnover as workforces became more diversified (2013). In this study, Hur emphasizes the importance of diversity management, or the ability to lead and manage teams of diverse individuals, in achieving outcomes, rather than diverse representation alone. In researching the association between inclusive management, diverse work groups, and retention, Moon (2018) also found that retention within gender diverse groups was positively influenced by inclusive practices.
Innovation & Creativity

Along with retention, innovation and creativity are also outcomes commonly associated with inclusive leadership. When individuals are comfortable to voice their opinion and speak up, they are more likely to suggest ideas even when people disagree, due to the relational and psychologically safe climate created by the leader (Carmeli, 2010). Carmeli looked at the openness, availability, and the accessibility of the leader and found that inclusive behaviors of the leader led to a safe climate, which in turn led to innovative behaviors in employees. Similarly, Qui, Liu, Wei, and Hu (2019) found that “when employees perceived that leaders showed more inclusiveness to their new ideas, technologies, and processes, they perceived being more valued and cared about by the organization and thus, increased their innovative behavior” (pg. 9). Choi, Tran, and Park (2015) found relationships between inclusive leadership, affective organizational commitment (AOC), creativity, and engagement. In their study, they posit that creativity is a mediating variable between inclusive leadership and engagement.

Retention and innovation/creativity are outcomes associated with inclusion. While some studies show varied and different results in job performance implications, inclusion does seem to improve retention and innovation of employees. Next, existing models of leadership that are associated with inclusion are reviewed.

Existing Models of Leadership Associated With Inclusive Climates

A few leadership styles align well to inclusion within teams, most notably inclusive or participative leadership, transformative leadership, and authentic leadership. Inclusive leadership activates inclusive behaviors in teams through involving others in an intentional and explicit way (Nembhard & Edmondson 2006). These
behaviors include involving all team members in decision making, encouraging divergent thinking, engaging team members in discussion, and consulting with team members (Mitchell et al. 2015). Inclusive leaders focus on exercising openness and accessibility to promote a diversity of opinions in the context of collective team goals (2015). In doing so, leaders who genuinely demonstrate inclusive and participative leadership lessen perceived status differences by embracing diversity.

Transformational Leadership is another style of team management that helps tap into the value of demographically heterogeneous teams (Kearney & Gebert, 2009). In teams with various ethnic backgrounds, age, and education, transformational leaders harness the value of diversity by engaging their team members through a more holistic and emotional bond:

Transformational leadership promotes the internalization of the goals and values that underlie the collective cause (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Moreover, the charismatic and inspirational appeals of the transformational leader establish a unifying superordinate social identity based on the common vision. Consequently, working toward meeting the common objectives becomes a means for a follower to enhance his or her self-concept (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). By fully engaging the followers motivationally in the effort to realize an inspiring vision, transformational leaders induce followers to share all their task-relevant information… At the same time, the transformational leader’s individually considerate behavior ensures that all team members feel acknowledged and appreciated in their uniqueness and are positively reinforced for the input they provide. (Kearney & Gebert, 2009, p. 79)
In other words, transformational leaders are able to create an environment of collective identity where team members share information and are motivated to work together on common goals while embracing differences. They stimulate thinking and encourage full membership and participation. In their study of 62 R&D teams, Kearney establishes that transformational leadership is a means to fully maximizing diverse perspectives and minimizing the negative consequences of social categorization in heterogeneous teams (2009). Their study demonstrated that transformational leadership was a means to derive value from the diversity represented in the group.

Lastly, Authentic Leadership reinforces inclusion from the lens of personal values. Authentic leadership refers to the alignment of core values and morals to behaviors. In essence, authentic leaders operate in a manner that is consistent with an internal guide and do not easily change their behavior due to external pressures (Boekhurst, 2015). Furthermore, the levels of personal affiliation leaders have with D&I goals and practice can have a bearing on the manner in which they convey the importance of D&I to others (Buengeler et al. 2018). Those that practice authentic leadership facilitate open communication and encourage others to “be themselves” thus leading to an enhanced perception of inclusion (Cotrill et al. 2014).

The research surrounding leaders and their inclusive practices continues to develop and there is opportunity to further the body of knowledge with more specific applied research in organizational settings. Though inclusion research is growing and the literature reviewed in this capstone provides a strong foundation, there are still gaps that this research study seeks to fill.

Gaps in Current Research
There is a growing amount of research on inclusion but there are no definitive models that adequately address the full experience of inclusion, how it is shaped in the workplace, and the role leaders play. Currently, many of the theoretical models of inclusion depend on existing social theories like Optimal Distinctiveness Theory and Social Identity Theory to derive a set of conditions in the workplace needed for inclusion. However, how those conditions are cultivated by leader practices is not addressed in detail. Also, much of the research is based on survey data of employees which helps quantify responses to a predetermined model of inclusion. There is room for further qualitative research to make meaning of how employees characterize and perceive inclusion from their perspective. Lastly, though words like belonging, value, esteem and the like are used in existing theories associated with inclusion, there is very little exploration of the internal emotional effects of inclusion.

Conclusion

In Chapter 2, I reviewed key literature relevant to the study of inclusion. Social Identity Theory, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, Leader Member Exchange, and Employee Voice are existing theories that are commonly referenced in inclusion research. In addition, researchers have also looked at existing types of leadership (e.g. Authentic Leadership) and how they contribute to inclusive climates and business outcomes. However, barriers like social categorization can impede inclusive climates. Lastly, innovation, creativity, employee retention, and overall performance are possible outcomes of inclusion and there is growing research that seeks to validate how inclusion is correlated with business results. In Chapter 3, I share the research methodology that was implemented for this capstone.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the research method I used in this capstone to explore how leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment. I present the methodology, data collection methods, sample information, analysis approach, and conclude the chapter with how I recognized and accounted for bias.

Research Methodology

Inclusion is a social experience and survey data is limited in providing details into how people feel and perceive inclusion. Data from company engagement surveys and similar tools can provide a sense of quantity and frequency but not necessarily details into the characteristics of inclusive experiences. Therefore, for this capstone, I employed a qualitative exploratory research approach. Qualitative research, broadly, is based on the methodological pursuit of understanding and making meaning of the experiences of others (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used this research methodology in order to form a better understanding of inclusion and to develop postulations about how leaders create an inclusive environment.

Inclusion is a very broad topic of research with many potential research questions to explore. Exploratory qualitative research is recursive and the components of my research informed each other, helping to clarify my area of interest, research question, analysis, and resulting interpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). How do leaders of teams
and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments? The goal of this study was to explore this question while gaining insight into what employees perceived to be inclusion, what inclusive experiences were important to them, and how they were emotionally affected when they were included.

Methods

For the qualitative data collection, 15 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually. Each interview was structured with several standard questions, but allowances were given to address other questions based on interviewee responses. This enabled both consistency in data collection and flexibility in capturing interviewee responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. During the interview, every participant verbally accepted a confidentiality statement and also verbally confirmed their willingness to participate. The interview protocol followed confidentiality and anonymity guidelines that were approved by the University of Pennsylvania IRB (see Appendix).

Interview Design

Each interview was designed to be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration and utilized the same set of structured questions. Table 4 displays the interview questions and related follow up questions that were used. Refer to Appendix 1 for the interview protocol, which included a verbal consent statement.

Table 4. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Clarifying questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>• What is your gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is your race/ethnicity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How long have you been in your career?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is your role level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What industry are you in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your type of work?</td>
<td>The qualitative sample of 15 interviewees spanned different genders, races, and work industries (refer to Table 5). I used purposeful sampling for this study in order to identify “information rich” study candidates that met criteria important to the inclusion research (Palinkas et al., 2013). Purposeful sampling criteria for the interviews follows:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did this experience make you feel?</td>
<td>1. <strong>Interviewees must have more than 5 years of work experience.</strong> Given the relatively small sample size, it was important to ensure the interviewees had enough work experience to draw from, increasing the probability of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was involved?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they do to make you feel included (or not included)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When has a leader made you feel included?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the team?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever had to hold back something about yourself in order to feel included in the workplace? If so, please share more details.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you have to hold back?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did this experience feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever had to change something about yourself in order to feel included in the workplace? If so, please share more details.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you have to change?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did this experience feel?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes you unique that you want people to embrace?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does bringing your “authentic self” to work mean to you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What other words or descriptions would you use to define inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything else about inclusion that you’d like to mention?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample

The qualitative sample of 15 interviewees spanned different genders, races, and work industries (refer to Table 5). I used purposeful sampling for this study in order to identify “information rich” study candidates that met criteria important to the inclusion research (Palinkas et al., 2013). Purposeful sampling criteria for the interviews follows:

1. **Interviewees must have more than 5 years of work experience.** Given the relatively small sample size, it was important to ensure the interviewees had enough work experience to draw from, increasing the probability of
inclusive/exclusive interactions they could reference. The sample in this research had minimum of 6 years of work experience and a maximum of 30 years. The average years in career was 18.6, making this sample primarily a mid-career demographic group.

2. *The sample must be working professionals and not in a full time entrepreneurial small business or a full-time student.* This research is focused on inclusion practices within environments where common management and organizational structures exist (e.g. manager hierarchy).

3. *The sample must include both majority and minority race groups.* Given the research is on inclusion, I wanted to make sure the experience of majority and minority groups were represented. The sample included representation from four race groups: 40% (6) White, 33% (5) Black, 20% (3) Asian, 7% (1) Other/Mixed.

4. *Interviewees must currently report or have reported to a people manager.* This was to ensure participants were able to speak to the role of leaders in the context of inclusion.

5. *Majority of the sample cannot be employees of my current company ACME.* This was to ensure the sample is not overly biased by current diversity and inclusion work being done in the organization. Only three people (20% of the sample) were current employees of ACME.

6. *The sample must span at least three industries and a mix of functional types of work.* This was to ensure the analysis was not specific to one industry and not specific to a particular work profile. The sample had representation from four major industries: 47% (7) Healthcare, 33% (5) Financial Services, 13% (2)
Education, 7% (1) Retail. It also spanned 8 different work types.

Candidates for the study that met the criteria above were identified through my professional network and solicited to participate in the study through email. Those that agreed to participate were then scheduled for a recorded video interview on ZOOM.

Table 5. Qualitative Interview Demographic Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Type of work</th>
<th>Years of Work</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Technology &amp; Analytics</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Individual Contributor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; Sales</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; Sales</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>VP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Other/Mixed</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sr. VP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Technology &amp; Analytics</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Technology &amp; Analytics</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>HR</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Mid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Technology &amp; Analytics</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis Approach

This capstone is an exploratory qualitative analysis. Interviews were recorded, audio was auto transcribed using a software service (NVIVO), and transcriptions were analyzed and coded for themes manually through NVIVO. Interviewee statements were individually labeled and categorized to identify themes. The analysis used in this study is a form of pattern recognition within the data and emerging themes were used as categories of analysis (Fereday et al., 2016). The process I followed is outlined below.
and was designed to recognize a potentially important inclusion moment and encode it prior to interpretation (Fereday et al., 2016):

1. Every transcribed interview response was reviewed
2. Responses that emphasized a possible theme were then coded with a descriptor (e.g. “voice”)
3. A response could be coded with multiple codes
4. As each interview response was analyzed, codes from previous interviews were used or new ones were added if the response was distinct
5. Response codes were categorized by question and further aggregated by similarity to identify parent themes.
6. Parent themes and sub themes for this study were analyzed for relevance by the number of interviews referencing that theme/sub-theme.

Labeling and categorization occurred iteratively as interviews were completed and transcribed. Furthermore, a theme was not deemed relevant or significant if less than eight interviews referenced this theme. Given the sample size, themes warranted a higher level of occurrence and frequency across interviews.

**Bias**

There are several potential biases I had when approaching this research. Due to the history of diversity of inclusion in the workplace, my assumption is that underrepresented groups are more in need of inclusion in comparison to the majority white population. In order to mitigate this bias, the purposeful sample included representation from both majority and minority groups. I also am aware of my own bias towards prioritizing racial and gender inclusion over the inclusion of other
underrepresented groups such as those with disabilities and the LGBTQ community. It’s important to note that even though not all underrepresented groups were included, I acknowledge that inclusion has a broader context and potential to benefit all people groups. Lastly, due to my positionality as a minority HR leader, I may carry an established understanding of diversity and inclusion issues, which may or may not be affirmed in the research. To ensure my practitioner perspective did not influence the interviews, my capstone academic advisor reviewed the interview protocol to make sure there were no leading questions. I was careful to ensure during the coding process and during the analysis to not impose my own feelings on the data. Primary themes needed to be represented in more than eight interviews and there needed to be substantive quotes that supported the themes.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the research methodology used in this study. A purposeful sample of fifteen individuals representing various demographic groups was selected based on criteria and an exploratory qualitative study was conducted. Each individual participated in a semi-structured interview that was recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions of the interviews were then coded to identify meaningful themes relevant to the primary research question: How do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments? The next chapter will provide the results of this exploratory study.
CHAPTER 4:

RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the results and themes from the qualitative interviews. First, I provide themes for the experiences that led to inclusion (or exclusion). Second, I summarize the affective response reported by interview participants in relation to inclusion or exclusion. Third, I present predominant themes related to how leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment.

Experiences Related to a Sense of Inclusion

Based on the interview protocol, every interview participant was asked to describe a time when they felt most included and excluded. Table 6 summarizes the inclusion experiences found in this study. Three key experiences were predominant and were reflected in the interview responses. Employees felt included when they exercised employee voice, had both friendly coactive relationships, and when they were attributed credibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded Themes</th>
<th># of Interviews referencing theme (% of interviews) (n=15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee Voice</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly Coactive Relationships</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributed Credibility</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Employee Voice**

Employee Voice behavior, as presented in Chapter 2, is described as the voluntary communication of ideas, recommendations, concerns, or other work related opinions (Weiss, 2018). All fifteen interviewees made reference to some form of voice behavior experience (either positive or negative) that they attributed to inclusion. A black female (F, Black) said, “I think it [workplace] felt inclusive because everybody felt like they had an equal voice.” Another (F, White) said, “Like when I feel exclusion in a team environment, it's generally about feeling like I'm either not being heard or I'm not being understood right. Or I'm being misunderstood.” All of the interviewees, regardless of demographic background and profile, expressed voice in the form of ideas, recommendations, decision-making input, and other work related opinions in relation to their inclusion experience.

Participants share that being a part of the conversation and being included in discussions that would benefit from their role or skills contributed to inclusion. As a white male explained, “There are definitely cases that can or have occurred where I could have added something to this. I mean, there should been many more voices on this thing going forward.” Study participants communicated their desire to have their voice heard and to make a valuable contribution to organizational work. One IT professional (M, White) said,

Somebody from another I.T. group coming to me and saying, hey, we gotta get this thing done. What are your thoughts? How would you do this? Not necessarily just I need you to do this. I feel like that’s probably kind of a theme around when I felt most included in decisions and conversations.
In this example, the individual felt included when their thought process was being valued and they were asked to help problem solve and share their critical thinking. On the opposite spectrum of being heard, one individual (M, White) described their experience of not being given time and space to speak.

And like we started to kick off the meeting and a colleague kicks it over to me and literally like I’m a half a sentence in and the CEO just starts talking to somebody else about another conversation he had. It was as if I was on mute, but I wasn’t on mute.

Having voice within a group and with leaders was a dominant theme in the interviews. Not only do people want to have the chance to share their thoughts, but they also want to be able to have influence. Being “at the table” was a sub theme of employee voice that is explored next.

**Being at the Table.** Eight interviews described voice experiences that involved interacting with leaders in a manner where they either had or did not have informal authority to influence decisions, strategy, and plans. Their ability to exercise informal authority by having a voice with leaders was valuable to their inclusion experience. A description provided by an interviewee (F, Hispanic/Mixed) clearly connected inclusion and their voice being received by those with greater formal authority:

We were interacting with the leadership, interacting as leaders. I never felt like it was a barrier. I just felt like we were welcome to the table, like from the CEOs to the board. You know, they valued what we said…and trusted our opinions to influence them. So I think that’s probably one of the reasons why I really stayed at the company so long and loved my experience.
As this interviewee describes, influencing leaders when she was lower in the organizational hierarchy positively shaped her experience. Another person (F, White) said,

I feel the most included when I feel I have that seat at the table where it doesn’t mean that all my ideas and what I want to happen is going to happen, but at least I feel like I can have that voice.

Furthermore, some referenced influencing strategy development:

You know, now I’m technically a little bit higher up from a position perspective, but since the beginning, since I was a manager, it’s always been you’re kind of just working right with the executives. You’re helping to define what strategy is (M, Asian).

Similarly, a younger manager (F, Asian) said,

But they highlighted my strengths and they included me on strategic decision making, even phone calls and meetings…at times, these are senior vice presidents and one was a CEO of a health system. I sometimes would even sit in as an acting member.

These descriptions clearly outline a non-hierarchical dynamic that contributes to employee voice and inclusion. A female Asian leader described an experience working with an executive team where she had to introduce strategic concepts that challenged current thinking.

I was essentially telling them that everything that they’ve done in the past isn’t relevant anymore and that they are following the wrong strategy, which could have been taken as criticism of them as leaders. None of them took it that way and
they were all very excited to hear the feedback and my thought on the way forward.

However, being at the table required not only space to speak but also the acknowledgement of what is said. A Black male interviewee described a meeting with leaders and how it made him feel like an outsider. He said,

I think about being in some leadership meetings when you realize you're kind of on the outside looking in. I can remember the senior V.P. one time just when she flat out just didn't acknowledge me at a meeting. You know, my hand was raised. I wasn’t in the club yet…my hand raised, [I was] giving a point, you know, you finally had an opportunity to talk. And it was almost as if you didn't say anything. It was almost like a press conference where you'd say something. She just was like, ‘Next question.’ I can remember leaving that meeting thinking I've got work to do or we just aren't going to mesh. But it was very clear that you were on the outside looking in.

In this example, the leader did not acknowledge the interviewee’s comments. To him, it was as if he didn’t say anything, which resulted in him not feeling a part of the in-group and excluded.

Being at the table, specifically with those with higher formal authority, was an important employee voice experience and contributed to inclusion per the interviews. Later in this chapter, leadership practices related to creating employee voice space and how leaders manage hierarchy will be covered in more depth. The next employee inclusion experience I cover is having an interactive relationship with leaders and teams.
Friendly Coactive Relationships

Nine of the fifteen interviewees (60%) highlighted having relationships that were both friendly and coactive at the same time. The friendly nature of the relationship was described as close, familial, and social. The coactive aspect of the relationship was goal oriented, focused on problem solving, and working together on tasks. The combination of a genuine friend relationship while coactively working together (Friendly Coactive) on meaningful tasks was perceived as inclusive.

In their statements, interviewees emphasized friendship relationships. “And we were all friends and we were working with our mentors” (F, Black). Another (M, White) commented on an inclusive team saying, “So lots of great connections. Very genuine, warm, welcoming connections outside of leadership team meetings and stuff.” The friendship connections were also described as familial. “It just felt like a family. It felt like I knew the team very well. I knew their personal lives” (F, White). The type of team relationship attributed to inclusion was a natural blend of personal relationships and working coactively together. Reflecting on a past team, an interviewee (F, Black) said, “We had an easy mix between friendship and workship if you will. I came into the team, they had already been working together. But the culture of that team was more collegiate than it was corporate.” On the other hand, exclusion was associated with low relational environments. One person (F, Asian) described low interaction as:

the exclusion department. There was not even side chat that much and less texting with the exclusion team [my current team]. I’m still in games with my [previous] leaders. They still send me birthday shout outs. You know, I’m just happy they
reach out on the web. I’m still the same person. So I sometimes look at myself. I’m like, am I doing something wrong?

Personal relationships were also seen as inclusive when there was a noticeable degree of help and support. “I think inclusiveness is about who can walk with you in this journey and how you can help each other out, look out for each other and also check on each other” (F, Hispanic/Mix). This sentiment provides further context to the familial dynamic described by interviewees. Especially when first joining a team, one participant (M, Black) felt included because their leaders and team members proactively reached out to him:

So the first thing that led to that inclusion was proactive reach out. You know, it was like how are you doing? You know, do you need anything? You know, all those sorts of questions to pull you along. And you felt like it wasn’t disingenuous.

Likewise, another interviewee (F, Black) said, “[That’s kind of what it [inclusion] felt like, like someone to help you understand who the players are. Someone to help you understand how to navigate like all the tools, systems, and processes.”

In terms of work, participants of the study also emphasized that having a productive and goal-oriented relationship contributed to inclusion:

So there wasn’t a lot of differentiation between what our friendship was like and what our work relationships were like, which I think is part of what made it feel inclusive, because we just felt like people who worked together, who liked each other and had a common goal (F, Black).
As mentioned earlier in this section, the mix of friendship and goal-oriented work created a friendly coactive relationship that was distinctly called out as inclusive. Accomplishing work together was a relationship building experience:

We were all like-minded in terms of singular goals. They all work their asses off too which is something that I respect...if I didn’t see that all of this stuff that we’re talking about wouldn’t have mattered. But I think they all had the same or similar dedication to the job that I did, and that made a big difference (M, Black).

A White female illustrated the friendly coactive dynamic of problem solving together as her team engaged in a natural process of informal relationship building and work-related interaction. She said,

We all were kind of sitting right next to each other. So there was a lot of that kind of camaraderie that would happen on a regular basis. And I think just our proximity and like getting around the table and like hashing things out, working things out real time, you know, really helped when there was an issue or a challenge. It wasn’t like formal. It wasn’t structured necessarily.

This friendly coactive relationship created an inclusive climate according to the study participants. An Asian male interviewee summarizes it nicely:

When I was working there [my old team], was some of the best times I’ve had from a career standpoint. It was just five or six of us all kind of in a room and you just didn’t have the benefit to be too hierarchical. We had like a person that’s leading but it was just to get stuff done. Everyone had to wear different hats…those times when I’ve been like in the zone with the team, it’s because we all click and get along. But we also know that we can kind of push each other and
are comfortable enough with each other, and respect each other enough that if we need to bring it back [to work] and drive forward, we get back into line. That’s when it’s clicking.

Nine out of fifteen interviews highlighted friendly coactive relationships contributing to their inclusion experience. The mix of a close social relationship while actively working together on important tasks seemed to create a climate of inclusion. The third theme of the participants’ inclusion experience is the degree in which participants were attributed credibility.

**Attributed Credibility**

Similarly to friendly coactive relationships, nine out of fifteen interviewees described how the degree of credibility they had with a team shaped their inclusion experience. In their interviews, they shared how having to prove their capability and credibility felt more exclusionary whereas when they were accepted as credible, they felt included. To underscore this point, one participant (M, White) said,

Like I was a full and complete member of the team from minute one, and I didn't feel like I had to run a gauntlet or do certain things to prove my worth. They sort of accepted me as a full member of the team from minute one.

This participant felt part of the team (belonging) and didn’t feel they had to prove their value. To underscore this point, an Asian female said,

I think what inclusion feels like to me is an environment that feels extremely supportive. Comfortable. Not critique or assessment driven where there is inherent trust in credibility and skill set. And there's never a question of how is
this person contributing or adding value…that the inherent skill set is assumed to be really strong and then the focus is all on the impact of the work.

From this statement, we see that the interviewee perceived they are included when they receive inherent trust in their capability. Conversely, evaluative interactions, especially when joining a team, are perceived to be exclusionary in nature.

For example, one participant remembered joining a team post graduate school and she not only had a collegial relationship with her peers where she received genuine help but she also felt she was attributed credibility as a team member. She (F, Black) said,

And it was like joining their squad, that made it feel it was kind of like, well, you're here now. You're on our team and this is how our team works. So they never made me feel like an outsider to the team that had to, like, prove that I deserve to be there.

This notion of proving oneself was a recurring theme across the nine interviews and had real implications to their inclusion experience. As strongly as some felt included when they were attributed credibility, others felt excluded when their experience and skills were not given credence. One experienced HR professional (F, White) shared how she joined a team, but the team did not receive her as credible:

So I went from this HR role into a business partner role. I’d been in one before, but I felt like because I hadn’t done it at COMPANY, there was this mindset and belief…well, you haven’t really been a business partner if you haven’t done it here. And that was frustrating. Right up front, it felt like you were trying to prove yourself to the team. It felt like you were trying to prove that you had skills and knowledge that you could bring to the table…it felt very demeaning at times.
Judgment was another term used when discussing the level of credibility one was attributed. A Black male shared that when he did well at work, he felt excluded because he believed the team had lower expectations of him:

Know what's funny about this judgment piece is the judgment usually comes when people are surprised that you get it right. So I remember one of the very first business planning presentations we had. And, you know, these folks were sizing me up, but I'm watching these business presentations and they were great. And I had a pretty strong business presentation. And the surprise that people expressed in that group after their presentation is the judgment. It's like, well, we're all in the same role. You consider yourself a smart, college educated guy. What did you think it was going to be? You know what I mean? So it was a situation like you're judging. I watched your work. But I'm at the mercy of your judgment. So it's not even judgment on the negatives. It's typically judgment after you get it right.

In this situation, the interviewee felt he was initially evaluated with low expectations. His peers had a preconceived notion of his skill set and were surprised he was able to deliver a sound presentation.

In summary, there were three predominant themes that shaped overall inclusion/exclusion for participants: the degree in which participants had a voice and seat at the table, the degree in which they had friendly coactive relationships (friendship along with working together on job tasks/problems), and the degree to which participants were attributed credibility.
Emotional Response to Inclusion Experiences

In this section, I present the interview data that describes the emotional response that interviewees had when experiencing inclusion or exclusion. Following the research definitions of inclusion presented in Chapter 2, inclusion is commonly described as retaining uniqueness while also experiencing a sense of belonging (Shore 2011). Analysis of the fifteen interviews provides additional insight into the effects of inclusion on the study participants. When asked how inclusion or exclusion experiences made them feel, the interview data suggests themes that provide greater clarity to what inclusion feels like. Table 7 provides an aggregated view of the emotional response themes derived from the coded interviews. For the purposes of this capstone, I summarize the top three emotional response themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># of interviews (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivational Energy</td>
<td>14 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Capability</td>
<td>12 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value &amp; Purpose</td>
<td>11 (73%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Motivational Energy

After experiencing inclusion or exclusion, fourteen (93%) of participants felt that their level of motivational energy was affected. They described situations in which they felt motivated or conversely, demotivated, to engage. Some described feelings of fun and enjoyment and also a sense that they made the right career decision. Others felt exhausted.

“'It’s more fun. It’s a more enjoyable environment when it’s inclusive,' “ a White female explained during her interview. A Black male mentioned, “So I wasn’t always as
technical, so contributing in like a technical space just made me feel like motivated to keep going further. And it just offered a huge sense of accomplishment.” In these examples, participants shared inclusive experiences that resulted in higher levels of motivation and energy in the workplace. Some of the positive affect to their motivational energy was communicated as favorable feelings towards their company. As an example, an interviewee (F, Asian) said, “It felt really good working at the system at large.” Another (F, White) said, “I felt like at peace with my job.” One person (M, Black) validated their job by saying, “It made you feel like you made the right career choice.”

In contrast, exclusionary experiences seemed to dampen people’s energy. Some people were negatively affected to the point where they did not want to engage in employee voice behavior. “It’s deflating. It’s the opposite of being energized…Let’s go through the motions…knowing that you’re voice isn’t going to be heard. It prevents me from really like going the extra mile to kind of help out” (M, Asian). Another person shared, “If I don’t feel welcomed or included in the group, I won’t share anything like I won’t. It’s not that I’ll hold back a certain piece of myself. I just I won’t engage. I will stay on the periphery” (M, White). Likewise, when dealing with leaders that dominate conversation with their point of view, an interviewee (F, Asian) said, “In those environments, because there’s not an open mindedness, you don’t feel as motivated to bring new ideas to the table.”

Exhaustion was a sub theme found in four of the interviews. All four interviewees were female. Three of the four were people of color. In their examples of exclusion, they reflected and shared how trying to belong or be seen as credible was mentally and emotionally tiring. “It’s a little exhausting right? What’s my track record? What…what
are we doing? What are we really focusing on and what’s really important here? (F, White)” These interviewees described fitting in as draining their energy. “It was exhausting…It was exhausting to try and fit in. And I know, part of any relationship, you have to do your part to find connections. And we want to do that. But it was just…I was feeling blocked” (F, Hispanic/Mixed). Energy was not only expended trying to fit in but also in trying to maintain a perception of being credible and perfect:

It’s absolutely exhausting and still exhausting. Like rethink everything in your head before you say it out loud because you tend to make sure that it’s perfect. Its’ exhausting to rethink everything before you write it, because when I make sure that it’s perfect and I think like all that energy could have been used just solving problems or just getting your work done (F, Black).

When asked, “How did your inclusion/exclusion experience(s) make you feel?”, the most significant emotions described were their level of personal confidence, sense of value/purpose, and motivational energy. Words that described belonging were mentioned but not to the degree in which these other emotions were reported.

Confidence in Capability

As shown in Table 7, 12 of the 15 of the interviewees (80%) described feelings that related to self-confidence. When they experienced inclusion or exclusion, they felt that their confidence in their capability was either heightened or diminished. When experiencing exclusion, study participants described moments of self-doubt and insecurity. One study participant (F, White) described an exclusion experience where she believed she was being type cast into particular project management jobs and felt she was not being seen as able to do other technical roles. She said, “It shakes my confidence,
right. Because it’s like, well, I think I’m technical, but other people don’t. So am I technical? And that … that self-doubt kicks in, that self-criticism kicks in…”

Another interviewee (M, Asian) described not being invited to a business development meeting that he should have been included in given his role: “And the insecurities start coming into the mind like, well, maybe they didn’t involve me because they don’t think I’m strategic. I have that strategic thinking, that strategic mindset to kind of get outside of just the project delivery bubble…” The interviewee goes on to describe his feelings stating,

Yeah, I’d say [I felt] insecurity because you’re kind of…you’re upset about it. I immediately am wondering…are you upset because you think you really could have brought value? Or are you upset because you perceived that folks don’t respect you? Both of them are not great.

In both of these examples, the interviewees shared exclusionary experiences and their emotional response was to question their capability, resulting in lower confidence. Similarly, another study participant (F, White) described an experience where her skills were not perceived as beneficial to the team. She went on to say, “We have a lot of doubt when people are saying you’re not like everybody else on the team. The strengths that you bring to the table are not the strengths that, you know, we need.”

Others expressed frustration and doubt when proving their credibility:

And that was frustrating right up front. It felt like you were trying to prove yourself to the team. It felt like you were trying to prove that you had skills and knowledge that you could bring to the table (F, White).
In a meeting with management, one person was told not to say anything and only ask one question. When asked about this situation, he (M, Black) said, “I understood what I needed to do to move forward and to get the buy in…to build my credibility….”

On the other hand, when interviewees experienced inclusion their confidence was bolstered as described here: “The team always felt a sense of confidence and empowerment to constantly influence, share, opinions, collaborate and everyone. Well, to a degree had a sense of empowerment in their role, that was greater than what you might normally see” (F, Asian). A White male said when he was approached for consultation (attributed credibility), “Yeah, I do actually know what I’m talking about because people are coming to me and that confidence boost is there.” This inclusive experience of being sought after for counsel affirmed his capability, knowledge, and credibility.

Another Asian female study participant who was included in meetings with the CEO of her company said:

And so it really helped build my confidence that the CEO included me and I was actively engaged and I felt like, ok, I can do this regardless of not having a strong healthcare background. And I was sitting at the executive table with other CEOs of hospital systems. So it really helped build the confidence. And then it also made me feel like I can do this.

Confidence also was related to idea sharing by a Black female participant as she stated, “I think it [inclusion] improves confidence. Right. Like there’s something about feeling included that makes you not filter your ideas.”
Next, the sense of personal value and purpose is explored as another predominant affective response.

_Value & Purpose_

In addition to confidence, 11 out of 15 (73%) interviewees described an emotional response related to a sense of personal value. When describing their response to inclusion and exclusion experiences, interviewees described personal value as being appreciated, validated, under-valued, or humiliated. When asked to participate in a project where he can use his skills, one person (M, White) shared, “I’m getting to put some of those skills on display and showcase that…here’s what I can do. You know, you’re getting to be a value and of use to this really larger body.” In this example, the participant describes a sense of usefulness and value when their capability was put to use. Like the previous example, one professional (F, White) experienced inclusion in the form of career advocacy and being noticed for the unique talents she had which led to her feeling valued: “So, of course, it motivates me, motivated me tremendously. It made me feel valued.” Another similar comment was made by White male when his leader stood up for him in a meeting and gave them space to share their opinion: “…but then it’s usually not till afterwards…I can look back and say, you stood up for me. He helped me through that. And yeah, my voice is valued, my opinion, its of value.”

On the other hand, interviewees also experienced times where exclusionary experiences made them feel less valued. After moving to a more exclusionary team, one interviewee felt a noticeable difference in their sense of personal value. She (F, White) said, “You know, I went from this great welcoming kind of family feeling, like I got my boss’s back, my boss has my back, and I’m really supported, into this environment where..."
I felt like I was undervalued, under appreciated.” After several exclusionary experiences, a White male senior leader who participated said,

After repeated exposure to feelings like that, I think it’s only natural to wonder if they’re treating you that way because you are not worthy of being treated differently. And you know, perhaps, … that isn’t something that you should expect.

It is interesting to note that some of the participants questioned if they did something wrong or were not good enough to be included. In this example, the interviewee was wondering if they were not “worthy” of better treatment. His sense of personal value was diminished. As illustrated by the stories and comments shared, there is a theme that inclusion or exclusion experiences influence the degree in which people feel valued.

A sub theme of personal value was a sense of purpose or reason for being a part of the group. Six out of fifteen (40%) interviewees referenced this feeling. Value was expressed in terms of being part of something larger than the individual. When his idea was launched into a formal body of work an interviewee (M, Black) said,

It was just a great feeling to know that it originated from like a small discussion and it got some legs under it. And that really became like a product. So I think that just maybe, you feel like, really a part of something.

One person (M, White) said, “I just want to be part of the solution and part wherever we’re headed.” When describing his ability to interact with regional vice presidents on certain key decisions, a Black male interviewee described the dynamic “made you feel like you were part of something bigger than yourself.” Lastly, one individual (M, White) said, “You’re feeling as though you’re useful, like you understand why you’re there. And
you feel as though you’re making an impact on this. I’m not just there to be there…I’m there for a reason.” This feeling of purpose emerged when he was contributing to a large project with meaningful accountability.

In the next section, I present thematic results of the leadership practices and behaviors that contributed to an inclusive (or exclusionary) experience for participants.

**Leadership practices and behaviors**

As study participants shared examples of inclusion, there were numerous references to leadership practices and behaviors that shaped their experience. Table 8 outlines themes that were evident in 10 or more interviews for how leaders created an inclusive experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># of interviews (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create voice space</td>
<td>13 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confer Informal Authority</td>
<td>13 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach &amp; Develop Employees</td>
<td>10(67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build Vulnerable &amp; Safe Relationships</td>
<td>10 (67%)</td>
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**Creating Voice Space**

As shown in the data earlier in this chapter, employee voice experiences contributed to inclusion according to participants. Leaders were often important actors in creating voice space within the examples provided. Primarily, they created the opportunity for participants to be heard by asking them questions and inviting them into
conversation. The leaders also demonstrated the ability to build and recognize the ideas of others.

Creating Voice Space Through Questions & Invitation. Nine interviewees (60%) mentioned that leaders created voice space by proactively engaging them in conversation. As an example, an interviewee (M, Asian) said,

You know, the room dynamic a lot of times is that people will defer to the senior leaders. So I've always appreciated when someone that's leading a meeting or leading a team is purposefully giving a voice to the people that might not be chiming in…You know, there's a there's kind of like a fine line of doing it in a way that you're coming off as putting someone on the spot versus asking someone's opinion and kind of directing questions towards them to pull them into the conversation and allowing them to have a voice.

Creating voice space required asking and directing questions to those that may not have had a chance to be heard, but not in a way that put the individual in an uncomfortable position. Another person (F, White) said, “They [leaders], showed a keen interest in what I had to say and what I thought about things they wanted to hear from me. They invited me to engage with them on topics pretty frequently.” Leaders formally inviting her to participate in work-related discussions created voice space.

It was also mentioned that the leader’s ability to notice when someone has been trying to speak and hasn’t gotten the opportunity is important to creating voice space. A participant (F, Black) said,

Like in a meeting, if multiple people are speaking, you know, just the way they [leader] were able to scan a room and see that somebody has been trying to speak
repetitively, for many times and keeps getting cut off, and they have the eye to say, “Well, what do you have to say? I see you’ve been trying to say something.” Instead of just grazing over it and letting that time pass.

Lastly, another interviewee (M, Black) said their leader intentionally opened the floor for certain issues to be raised:

I mean, literally, she went around the room and spoke specifically to some of the concerns that I brought to her and at that point she gave me the floor to be able to elaborate on what they saw with everyone else and did not try to just kind of push us aside and say, ‘Ok, I got your information, thank you.’ but allowed us to speak to it.

Leaders in these examples created voice space by intentionally pulling people into conversation, asking them what thoughts they have, reserving time for people to share their opinions, and formally inviting people to engage with them on work topics. The other sub-theme for creating voice space was the leader’s ability to build and recognize the ideas of others.

**Building & Recognizing Ideas.** How leaders built and recognized ideas shaped inclusion for ten interviewees. Interviewees believed their voice—in the form of ideas—was an important factor in feeling they were being seen and heard. “Like, even if you just got an idea from someone, you know, giving credit to that person for their idea and then supporting them through that idea and to the final project, then applauding them for doing an excellent job” (F, Black). Leaders who gave credit for ideas to the respective employee seemed to create a sense of inclusion as evidenced in the descriptions shared by
the respondents. A study participant (M, Asian) shared their experience of working in an environment where ideas had to funnel through a structured communication chain:

[My workplace] was pretty rigid in the sense where the manager who’s in charge of selling and they’re the ones in charge of talking to clients about certain new ideas. Whereas the consultants or the analysts, if they have a good idea, they’re supposed to bring it to the manager. And the manager is the one that’s supposed to bring it up with the client, like that rigid way of thinking kind of blocks that inclusivity where everyone who has an idea they have the opportunity to move that.

This participant describes a situation where leaders are the ones communicating the ideas of others and the employee does not have a seat at the table. In addition, taking someone else’s idea also created a sense of being “used”:

I was told the team players don’t think it’s worth it. We just went through like three months of planning. So then the next moment, they were bringing in other people to do what I just said. I felt used. So you take my idea? (M, Black)

This study participant described feeling “used” when their idea was taken and executed by others without recognition, especially after they were told the idea was not worth it.

Lastly, interviewees described how inclusive leaders built the ideas of others and managed bad ideas without making people feel marginalized. A person (F, White) said,

What’s important to me is that the leader and like my peers are creating an environment where like there's not a stupid idea…where you're creating an environment where I'm not afraid to speak up because I may get like, you know, smack down. That's a cultural thing from my perspective, in terms of how does
the leader respond to ideas that he or she may not agree with, because that reaction, a negative reaction like causes people to go inward.

In summary, leaders who created an inclusive environment created voice space for their employees intentionally through proactive questions and invitation. They also built the ideas of others while recognizing them for their ideas. They also created safe environments where people were not penalized for bad ideas. The next theme in the research was the ability of leaders to confer informal authority to employees.

Conferring Informal Authority

How leaders confer informal authority was a theme in thirteen out of fifteen (87%) interviews. According to participants, having a seat at the table meant that leaders are willing to hear and accept the voices of others with lower formal positional power. Furthermore, in the interviews, participants described inclusive leaders as empowering, accessible, part of the team, and collaborative. Exclusionary leaders were described as directive, micromanaging, asserting authoritative power, and fixated on their own perspectives. One interviewee, described inclusive leaders who managed the authority dynamic well when she (F, Asian) said,

I think both of them [leaders], I would consider much more modern leaders. I feel like modern leaders have this type of style where it’s kind of old school leaders or more traditional leaders are more top down hierarchical. It’s like command and control from the top. And they are not like that. They’re much more collaborative leaders...It’s ‘we’re going to figure this all out together’. And I as your leader I’m here, just to facilitate the process and inspire the process versus have all the answers and then give direction and instructions for people to go and execute. So
that style I’ve loved and made me feel like I was part of a really inclusive environment.

This example aptly describes the role of the inclusive leader and articulates the difference from those that are perceived to be exclusionary. The interviewee emphasizes how the role of the leader should be a “facilitator” and that the inclusive leader does not overly exert power in the form of solutions and commands.

Empowerment. Leaders that did not micromanage and trusted their team’s capability to get the job done created a feeling of inclusion. In contrast, a leader who exerted their formal authority and power through their expertise created exclusion. As mentioned by a White male:

So he [inclusive leader] was the opposite of a micromanager…He had a good team and he trusted them to get their stuff done. And that's why I thrive. Go do what you do. Yeah. I'm here to, you know, again, block or help out when needed…the other guy was a technical genius, had all the answers and much of his team was very much just doers and takers…I’m the king, you go do these ten things, you go do these nine things come back to me and then I’ll put it all together and take the credit.

From the perspective of this interviewee, inclusion meant being trusted to do the job and have a level of autonomy. The inclusive leader was a guide and was there to help resolve challenges. The exclusionary leader dictated steps and actions. Another participant (M, Black) expressed how one of his leaders empowered him by giving him autonomy in how to do the job: “Probably the biggest from that leader is that he just empowered us. I felt empowered to do the job the way that I saw fit. I mean, that was the best thing that he
could have done as a leader.” On the other side of the spectrum, one participant (F, White) described a very directive leader. “It was very prescriptive,” she said. “I found it to be a very stifling environment and one that was highly directive. This leader wanted and expected people to line up and be exactly like she was. And her coaching to me was petty, not meaningful.”

Leaders who empowered their team members through collaboration, autonomy, and utilizing their capabilities had an influence on how included participants felt. Another way in which inclusive leaders conferred informal authority was by being receptive to challenge and different points of view.

**Openness to Being Challenged.** Seven interviewees emphasized how they felt included when leaders accepted counsel and challenge. A Black female described an inclusive leader who was open to being challenged in the following way:

I remember that she didn’t create a lot of distance between us and her. So it wasn’t like this is the team and that’s the leader. It was like she was part of the team. And sometimes her ideas were the ones that we could reject. And so because of that, I think that also helped that dynamic in terms of just feeling open and easy if you will.

In this example, the team was able to “reject” the leader’s ideas and challenge the leader’s thinking. The leader created a safe voice space for others and conferred informal authority by not allowing their thoughts and opinions to dominate. It is important to note that this experience created the perception that the leader was closer to the team and decreased the perceived separation of status and power. To further highlight this point,
one participant (M, White) described a time where they counseled and challenged the thinking of a leadership team during a talent review:

   I had only been there for a few weeks and I didn’t really know any of the people.
   But I interjected a fair bit and sort of asked them questions and tried to help them think about how they were evaluating and, you know, help them see maybe inconsistencies in how they were thinking…they were great about it. I just saw them sort of receive it. I just felt my vote was an equal vote.

Not only did this receptivity of a challenging viewpoint create voice space, it also made the interviewee feel they had an “equal” voice. In this case, the interviewee perceived that they were given a level of authority and an equal level of influence to leaders in that moment.

   One leader explicitly told an interviewee (F, Hispanic/Mixed), “You’re the leader here.” This intentional conference of informal authority resulted in an inclusion experience. In reference to this experience, the interviewee said,

   …trusting your recommendations and asking you for counsel. Not that I’m big in needing this, but every once in awhile I like the recognition and appreciation for that. Those are some of the ways that I felt have been meaningful to me. To be treated on an equal level.

The leader was conferring informal authority by seeking counsel, recognizing the interviewee’s leadership role, and as a result, the interviewee felt a sense of equality in influence and perceived status.

   Other ways for how leaders confer informal authority and reduce the perceived power gap was through working with team members collaboratively on tasks and also
making themselves accessible and present. These actions conveyed that the leader was with the team and not separate. A Black male described and compared two different experiences to emphasize the role of present and accessible leaders:

So we came from an environment previously in this company where a lot of the veep’s regional and regional directors really weren’t present. They almost feel like individuals you couldn’t touch. With this group it was the opposite. These regional VPs, directors, they were present. You can call them. You felt like they were in it with you. And that’s a culture that they forced on those that worked for them.

In his example, leaders who were accessible conveyed a feeling that the leader was “with” the group and alongside the employee, not untouchable like the former leadership group.

Next, I share the third theme of leaders creating an inclusive experience by coaching and developing employee skills and capability.

*Coaching and Developing Employees*

Ten out of fifteen interviews (67%) described inclusive leaders to be developmental and coach-like. There were a variety of ways in which these leaders were seen as coach-like and developmental in their actions. The interviewees described inclusive leaders as not being overly critical, providing developmental opportunities via work assignments, showing empathy, and demonstrating a positive disposition. For example, a White female said,

He’s able to put people and resources where they most need to be placed…First of all, he is a phenomenal listener, super empathetic, picks up on signals that are,
you know, stated and not stated nonverbal cues, just has a really good finger on the pulse of things.

This leader seemed to know how to best utilize the people on the team while being very conscious and in tune with the state of his team. Some leaders were said to be more accepting of failure as a learning opportunity. For instance it was said, “She [inclusive leader] created an environment where she really encouraged a lot of sharing and owning up to when we failed at something and how could we all learn from that. There was a high kind of learning growth mindset” (F, White).

One participant (F, Black) expressed their thoughts on inclusion and the development focus of leaders in this way:

I think inclusive leaders, in my experience tend to be competent and secure. They understand the intersection of development and growth and performance. So I think that understanding how to get the performance out of a person or a team and understanding where they need to grow and being able to develop them to get them to the right performance as individuals on the team and then the team as a whole. I feel like when people approach things from that perspective, everyone always feels included because they feel like they're contributing and they feel like their contribution matters. And as they contribute, they're feeling better about themselves and they're getting better.

To this participant, inclusion is associated with the ability of the leader to get the best out of their people by focusing on their development and performance. The leader plays a proactive role instead of a passive role in the growth of the employee’s skills and capabilities. An example of this would be when on participant (F, Asian) spoke of an
inclusive leader and said, “They recognized my skillset, they challenged me by giving me some stretch assignments, they highlighted my strengths.” Another supportive example is how a leader invested time in a participant (F, White) and provided work that would build her career:

I had a lot of gas in the tank to put into my work and it was noticed. So I developed some advocacy or some advocates noticed and invested in me…I became a candidate for roles with progressive levels of responsibility and extra project assignments.

Several participants also expressed when leaders were not focused on coaching and development which led to feeling excluded. In these examples, leaders were not willing to put in the effort to develop their skills or downplayed the capability of the employee. A study participant (F, White) said, “It felt very demeaning at times. I often had conversations with a V.P. of that group where he would ask me how old [I was] as an implication to how experienced I was and how capable I was.” When joining a team where Black male employee was learning a new technical trade, the leader made the interviewee feel alienated:

Coming out of grad school, getting into the field and things were fast and furious. They wanted the technical acumen to be at a certain level and you’re giving it 100%. But you’re told that things are fine and everything is good, but you kind of know something’s a little off. You try to work as hard as you can but you only can do what you can do. But I think you often sometimes feel alienated when it’s visibly recognizable that maybe you might not be perfect. You’re not given opportunities to go deeper into refinement. So sometimes you might be given
projects that don’t offer the landscape to help you shape whatever it is you’re kind of lacking in.

From his perspective, he wanted to be given a developmental chance to grow in his technical skill and be directly coached. He did not receive candid feedback and the leader held back opportunities, which signaled that the interviewee’s capability was not good enough.

In summary, study participants experienced inclusion when their leaders focused on their growth and intentionally focused on developing their capabilities and coached them. The leaders applied developmental assignments, stretch projects, and provided opportunities to grow. They also recognized how to utilize employee strengths and did not penalize them for failures or underdeveloped skills. The final leadership practice theme that shaped inclusion was the relational vulnerability expressed by the leader.

**Vulnerable & Safe Relationships**

Ten out of fifteen (67%) interviewees described leaders that created inclusive climates as having a vulnerable and safe relationship with them. Comments were made about how these leaders were honest in their communication, were transparent when they didn’t have the answers, and had a quality relationship with the members of the team. Furthermore, three of the interviewees described how the inclusive leaders they worked with were willing to protect and advocate for their teams even when there was risk in doing so. Leaders who were not as vulnerable in their relationship demonstrated a lack of self-awareness, according to three of the interviewees resulting in feelings of fear and hostile environment. At the heart of the interview comments was a theme that the inclusive leader practices a more vulnerable and safe relationship. The leader engaged
with the team in manner that required emotional risk, as well as risk to their perceived power and credibility with the team. One of the leaders mentioned was described in the following way:

There was genuineness that he wants to get to know you…he makes a point to get to know everyone really well. It just comes off in a way that you can tell he’s genuinely interested. And that’s leadership. Him showing genuine interest in us, when he has directions that we don’t necessarily agree with, we know it’s coming from a good place (M, Asian).

This CEO created an emotional connection with their employees and exercised a level of vulnerability in showing a genuine people-focused side to their leadership. On the contrary, leaders that were experienced to be more exclusionary were not as self aware in how their actions created unsafe climates for employees. A participant (F, White) shared an example of leaders who didn’t create an open environment by how they reacted to people:

So I see a lot of leaders do this like fly off the handle thing and it creates a culture of fear. Because you're like, oh, my gosh, oh, my gosh, are they going to fly off the handle when I give them this bad news? Are they going to lose their marbles…that emotional reaction to receiving bad news in that example does not create a culture of openness. You have a culture of fear. Because you don't want to be the one who gets their hands slapped. So I think it sets the tone really for the whole organization.

These leaders emotionally reacted in a way that did not create an open environment, rather a “culture of fear”. Fear was produced instead of a sense inclusion.
Other leaders were vulnerable in that they admitted that they did not have the answers or were struggling with certain situations. “He is vulnerable at times and shares things that he’s trying really hard to change that he’s struggling with” (F, White)

Another (M, White) said,

There's an aspect to disarming somebody as well when you admit that you don't know all the answers. So that is something that I appreciate with a leader knowing that they know what they're doing, but they're also human, right. They also experience doubt. They also have failures. And when they let you know about that, it kind of makes it OK for you to fail.

How the leader was open about their human flaws created a safe space for this interviewee to feel he could try things and fail. The interviewee mentioned being “disarmed” with this type of leadership, which helped level the playing field between the leader and the individual.

Lastly, three of the 15 (20%) participants suggested leader vulnerability in how they were willing to stand up for the team even if it might be at their own expense.

She was totally willing to fight for us…and I think that also created that culture to where we really felt like she had our backs. Like if someone wasn’t playing well with us or they weren’t aligning or they weren’t doing their part. She was totally willing to go to bat for us (F, White).

In this example, the interviewee expresses how the leader was willing to “fight” for the team, which implies a level of risk and vulnerability for the leader. Another interviewee (F, Black) shared how an exclusionary leader was more concerned with self-preservation:
I feel like my boss right now is kind of like that [exclusionary]. Not as self-aware, rigid…and I would say his primary goal is self-protection versus team protection. So you feel like he’s on your team when you’re talking to him and then when you get into the broader groups, conversation goes a certain way, then he goes that way too and you’re kind of left hanging.

This illustrates a leader who does not “have the person’s back” and does not align with them in the moment where the individual is looking for leadership support.

Again, how leaders expressed vulnerability with their teams seemed to have shaped the experience of inclusion or exclusion. Leaders who stood up for their teams, expressed emotional vulnerability, and were transparent with their limitations helped make the individuals interviewed feel included while also creating a safe environment. Leaders who were fixated on their ideas, lacked emotional self-control, or did not support their employee created exclusion in the workplace.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I included themes that were predominant in the interviews. The main themes that shaped inclusion/exclusion were the degree in which participants exercised employee voice behavior, the degree in which they were attributed credibility, and the degree to which they had friendly coactive relationships. Confidence, a sense of personal value and purpose, and motivational energy were three primary emotional responses to inclusion/exclusion experiences. Furthermore, leaders played an important role in forming inclusion experiences. Leaders that shaped inclusion created voice space, conferred informal authority, coached and developed their employees, and built vulnerable and safe relationships with the participants.
In Chapter 5, I present my conclusion to this research. I provide my interpretations of the themes and propose an inclusive leader practice model that can be further tested in the work environment. Also, I share my thoughts on the limitations and future applications of this research in the work environment.
CHAPTER 5:  
ANALYSIS & CONCLUSION

Introduction

In this chapter, I summarize the themes and findings from the capstone research and provide my interpretations of the data. I also propose a model for inclusive practice for leaders, address limitations in the research, and share future research considerations. Lastly, I summarize how the findings might be put into practice in the workplace and share my personal learning.

Summary of Findings

How do leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for inclusive environments? There were several key themes that were evident, as presented in Chapter 4, that help form potential answers to this question. I summarize the research by presenting three key findings:

1. Conditions for an inclusive environment - Employees experience greater inclusion when they have voice and a seat at the table, they are viewed as credible, and they have friendly coactive relationships that are both familial and work-task oriented.

2. Leader practices influencing an inclusive environment - Leaders are effective in forming inclusive experience for those in lower formal positions by creating voice space, conferring informal authority, coaching and developing employees, and building vulnerable and safe relationships.

3. Emotional Reponses to Inclusion - Inclusive environments raise employee confidence in capability, affirm their personal sense of value and purpose, and produce motivational energy.
In the next section, I share my interpretations of these findings, what they contribute to existing research, and how they reveal insight into the practices of leaders that create conditions for an inclusive environment.

**Interpretation of Findings**

*Finding #1 – Conditions for an Inclusive Environment*

The interview themes supported existing research that employee voice is heavily correlated to inclusive environments (Weiss, 2018). The study participants experienced inclusion when they were heard and when they had influence on decisions and strategy. Being “at the table” was a specific sub-theme that emphasized employees not only want to be heard, but they also want to be heard by those with greater positional authority in a genuine way. Employee voice was not just about the freedom to speak up but it was important to see one’s ideas, recommendations, and perspectives determine decisions and actions. In other words, greater inclusion occurred when someone’s voice had power to shape the work. I believe this finding helps accentuate the importance of employees making a contribution beyond just speaking up.

The theme of having a seat at the table also highlights the importance of hierarchy in the study of inclusion. Informal and formal role authority seemed to contribute to the level of inclusion that study participants experienced. Conferring greater informal authority to the employee in interactions had a positive influence on inclusion. The data suggests that inclusion occurs when employees share in activities typically perceived as responsibilities of those with formal authority (e.g. decision making, strategy building, recommendation setting, challenging recommendations).
Employees also want to know they are seen and treated as credible in the roles they play. Making someone work more than expected to earn respect, disregarding previous experience, or not giving credence to someone’s ability can make someone feel excluded. The degree to which someone is attributed credibility was not emphasized in current research, and I believe this is something that can be further explored. The LMX-7 questionnaire (Scandura and Graen, 1984) does allude to this with a question related to how a leader recognizes someone’s potential but does not necessarily capture the concept of attributing credibility in daily interactions.

To employees, the degree to which they are believed to be credible may help them know they are “in” or “out” and I suggest is a form of social validation. When someone perceives they are treated as credible and capable, they are likely to feel more included. Asking for someone’s insight, leveraging their experience, and seeking people’s counsel are ways to attribute credibility to a person. These signals validate for someone that they have something to offer that is of value. This finding does not take into account the actual performance track record of the employee, and there may be valid reasons for someone to be perceived as less credible. However, in situations like joining a new team, the idea of proving your worth can lower a sense of inclusion. Employees want to feel valued, bring value, and be recognized as capable to do the job or capable of learning to do the job well.

Lastly, the degree of friendly coactive relationships someone has with co-workers, especially leaders, is also associated with inclusion experiences. As shown in this study, employees that felt included were problem-solving and working together with their colleagues while also having a close friend relationship. This friendly coactive
relationship is not only work-related but is more social and intimate. This finding adds to current research by providing greater clarity to the characteristics of the inclusive relationship between colleagues. Working closely together in a collaborative manner on work tasks and also having a genuine relationship provides in-group access and in the process reinforces trust. A purely surface-level relationship or just a work-focused relationship may not create the conditions for employees to feel included.

Similar to the theory of Leader Member Exchange (LMX) (Scandura and Graen, 1984), it is clear in this study that people felt that a positive leader relationship interaction helped create inclusion, while low quality relationships were perceived to be more exclusionary. The data supports that leaders who show genuine interest in building a relationship while also working on meaningful tasks with employees can lessen perceived status differences and also promote a higher quality LMX that in turn creates a sense of inclusion. This friendly coactive relationship with the leader signals that a person is part of the in-group with the leader, which may encourage others to engage in a quality relationship with the person.

Finding #2 – Leadership Practices Influencing an Inclusive Environment

The central focus of this study was to explore how leaders of teams and organizations create the conditions for an inclusive environment. This study provided insight into the patterns of behaviors and practices that the study participants believed created an inclusive environment for them. Specifically, the study results showed that inclusive leaders practiced creating voice space, conferring informal authority, and investing in the coaching & development of their employees. They also built vulnerable and safe relationships. Much of the research presented in chapter 2 provided theories
associated with inclusion (e.g. employee voice, LMX) and possible frameworks for inclusive leadership based on existing theoretical research (E.g. Randal et. al 2018 ). However, current research has the opportunity to further define the specific practices of leaders from the analysis and understanding of employee experiences. This capstone provides some missing information to existing models by providing insight into the common behaviors and leader practices contributing to inclusive experiences through a qualitative study of employees. In Chapter 4, I show that inclusion was commonly experienced when employees had voice, were attributed credibility, and had friendly coactive relationships. I believe the leader practices in the framework shown in Figure 2 help create the conditions for employees to have these core inclusion experiences.

Figure 2. Inclusive Leader Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Create Voice Space</th>
<th>Confer Informal Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotes voice with questions and invitation</td>
<td>Empowers by giving autonomy in how people approach work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows others into decisions, strategy, and planning (seat at the table)</td>
<td>Open to challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds and recognizes ideas of others</td>
<td>Collaborates and rolls up sleeves with the team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Build Vulnerable &amp; Safe Relationships</th>
<th>Coach and Develop Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builds genuine relationships and emotional connection</td>
<td>Provides development opportunities, assignments, and projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admits to not having answers, expresses flaws, and leans on team for solutions</td>
<td>Does not overly judge failure / not overly critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stands up for individuals and team at own risk (&quot;Got your back&quot;)</td>
<td>Appreciates and utilizes strengths of team members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Bejoy Philip, 2020)
This framework of leadership practices not only reinforces existing theories associated with inclusion (e.g. Employee Voice) but also articulates practical leadership actions that lead to experiences that were most associated with inclusion. Surprisingly, I did not find any predominate themes for how leaders addressed discrimination, racism, or unconscious bias. It may be that these concepts are reasons for why a leader may not apply inclusive practices equitably across a diverse group. However, from the employee perspective, mitigating these potential barriers are not the primary leadership practices that create inclusion experiences. Based on the analysis, Table 9 articulates how the leadership practices found in this study create the conditions for employee voice, credibility, and friendly coactive relationships.

Table 9. Leader Practices and How They Create the Conditions for Inclusive Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusive Leader Practices</th>
<th>Primary Inclusion Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create Voice Space</strong></td>
<td>Leaders who intentionally create voice space and a seat at the table encourage employees to speak up and share ideas. Building and recognizing ideas helps further encourage voice and employee belief that they can shape the work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confer Informal Authority</strong></td>
<td>Being open to challenge and different perspectives, leaders cultivate employee voice. A leader who is not fixated on their own idea elicits more voice in the form of ideas from their team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coach &amp; Develop Employees</strong></td>
<td>Leaders create a safe place for new ideas, approaches and “bad” ideas for the purpose of learning through a constructive and non critical approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Build Vulnerable and Safe Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Not having all the answers allows the employee(s) to elevate ideas, give recommendations, and role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the next section, I provide interpretations of the emotional response study participants had when they experienced inclusion.

**Finding #3 – Emotional Responses to Inclusion**

As summarized in Chapter 4, study participants communicated three main emotional responses when experiencing inclusion: Confidence, Personal Value and Purpose, and Motivational Energy. Much of the inclusion research associated “belonging” and “uniqueness” to describe employee perceptions of being included. How does someone interpret belonging and that they are unique? I argue that belonging and uniqueness does not fully express the specific set of emotions that employees feel when being included. Existing research has associated belonging and uniqueness with inclusion from the standpoint of social identity theory (Shore, 2011), whereas this research presents how employees in the workplace actually feel when experiencing inclusion.

A general sense of belonging was not a major theme but was mentioned by 47% of the participants. Belonging and uniqueness, as described in Shore’s model (Shore, 2011), are assumed requirements for inclusion based on social theories of SIT and ODT. For employees, I found that the combination of confidence, a sense of personal value and purpose, and motivational energy are more accurate emotional signals of inclusion, specifically in the workplace. In essence, inclusion is interpreted by how someone feels in response to the group and not defined solely by how someone is treated by the group.
It is quite possible that two people can experience similar things in a group or with a leader but have very different emotional responses. These emotional effects are more indicative of inclusion in the workplace and may also have greater correlation to inclusion outcomes like creativity, performance, and employee retention. It could be that when someone feels greater confidence, personal value, and motivational energy within a group that they are more apt to believe they belong. These feelings could also contribute to someone presuming their “uniqueness” is valued. Ultimately, this study reveals specific emotional responses in greater detail adding to our understanding of what it feels like to be included.

Next, I present a hypothetical model of inclusive leadership that integrates the findings and interpretations of this study.

**Inclusive Leader Practice Model**

Below, in Figure 3, I present the Inclusive Leader Practice Model that depicts the relationship between inclusive leadership practice, employee inclusion experiences, and emotional responses to inclusion. I also show possible connections to other inclusion concepts and organizational outcomes that are presented in existing research related to inclusion. This model provides an integrated view of how leaders can create the conditions for an inclusive climate for employees.
The Inclusive Leader Practice Model (ILPM) focuses on the specific approaches and behaviors of workplace leaders and how they create the necessary experiences that lead to inclusion. This model adds to inclusion research in the following ways:

First, the model articulates specific and actionable leadership practices that create inclusion experiences. Some of the practices, like conferring informal authority by being open to challenge and building vulnerable relationships by not having all the answers are specific behaviors that are not thoroughly examined in existing research.

Second, the model articulates the relationship between leadership practices and employee inclusion experiences. Attributing credibility emerged as a unique insight in
this research. Also, a friendly coactive relationship is a finding that adds to current research by providing more nuanced detail to the type of interaction that employees perceive to be inclusive. Along with the details found in Table 9, this model suggests how inclusive leader practices create the conditions for inclusive climates.

Third, the model enhances the understanding of employee inclusion by emphasizing emotional responses of employees to workplace inclusion. The model orients to the experiences that employees define as inclusive and their affective response instead of the actions or intent of the group (feeling valued vs. being valued by the group). Confidence in capability, personal value and purpose, and motivational energy further expand the research on what internal reactions employees have when they experience inclusion beyond what is typically referred to as belonging, uniqueness, or authenticity.

Limitations

The research in this capstone was a qualitative exploratory study based on fifteen interviews and helps to define a model of inclusive leadership that is relevant to the workplace. This study has a few limitations that could be addressed by further research.

Noticeable patterns were identified through the interviews but a larger sample size would provide more data to assess the interpretations made in this study. In addition, the analysis does not take into account the age or hierarchical level of the interviewee and there could possibly be further insight gained by analyzing the data and themes for different demographic groups. Due to the sample size, doing so was not deemed appropriate for this study. The sample could also expand in the number of industries that it accounts for. Most of the study participants represented larger institutions and the study
did not extend to small businesses. Furthermore, since this capstone is focused on inclusion, the sample could have improved with a greater number of under represented minorities and overall diversity.

Though the study provides greater insight into the perceived inclusion experience, attributes like performance, skill proficiency, and workplace competencies of the employee were not assessed. These attributes could possibly have a moderating relationship to the degree to which leaders demonstrate inclusive practices as well as the frequency of inclusive experiences an employee encounters.

This research is focused on inclusion from the vantage point of the employee, which provides a clearer picture of their experience. However, it must be noted that their leaders were not included in the study to provide context, reasons, or justification for their behaviors and practices.

Lastly, barriers to inclusive practices were not explored in the study. As indicated in the proposed Inclusive Leadership Practice Model (Figure 3), I present an assumption that there are potential barriers like bias or poor performance that could impede inclusion practices and experiences. These barriers should be considered in future research as variables that also shape an inclusive climate.

Future Research

Further research into the study of inclusion in the workplace and the role that leaders play is needed. In this study, I present an exploratory model that can be used to better understand the correlation between leader practices and a climate of inclusion. There are also other influences to a climate of inclusion that can be researched. For example, how do values of a leader enable a leader to practice inclusive leadership? What
role do cultural differences play? Research should also look at the affect of employee emotions of inclusion on performance and business outcomes.

Related to teams, additional studies of inclusive leadership should consider how leaders shape team inclusion behavior. For example, how does role modeling inclusive practices influence the group dynamic? Furthermore, what team practices enable the inclusion experiences described in this study?

Continued research could also look into the benefits and potential consequences of inclusive practices on the leader. Does inclusive leadership affect the progression of leaders? Does inclusive leadership ever backfire? Context is important in applying leadership approaches and further research is needed to determine when inclusive leadership practices are beneficial and when other forms of leadership (e.g. transformational) are more appropriate.

Next, I share practice implications of the capstone research and how the insights in this study can be applied in the workplace.

**Practice implications**

The capstone research findings and the Inclusive Leadership Practice Model should be further tested to determine their applicability in the workplace. As the data suggests, leaders can experiment using the behaviors such as creating voice space or building friendly coactive relationships with employees to create a more inclusive environment. Applying the practices within this model has potential for shaping employees’ confidence, sense of value/purpose, and motivational energy. Human Resource practitioners can make observations of their work environment to determine if certain practices and experiences within the model might be beneficial to advancing an
inclusive climate. ILPM has room for further validation through workplace application and testing to identify where the model holds true and how it may be improved. Researchers also can use the model as a basis for a larger quantitative study. The hope for this model is that it will be tested and found to be valuable in the development of leaders, useful in building future measurement methods of inclusion (e.g. adapted LMX survey), and ultimately a viable model for advancing inclusion at work.

I conclude this capstone in the next section by sharing my reflections, personal learning, and how I’d like to carry this research forward.

Conclusion

Before this capstone, I defined inclusion as being my authentic self and experiencing a degree of social belonging. I also believed inclusion was all about the importance of equity and anti-discrimination. Even though these are still important, this study revealed a specific set of inclusion experiences and emotions that expanded my understanding of the topic. I was surprised to see how significant things like conferring informal authority, attributing credibility, and employee voice were to the experience of inclusion. I also never would have known that more nuanced behaviors like “having your team’s back” or allowing yourself to be challenged shaped inclusion. Some of the implicit assumptions I may have had about inclusion were made more explicit as well. For example, I assumed that people wanted their ideas to be heard, but this research made me realize how important building and recognizing ideas was to employee inclusion.

I was also surprised by the commonality between stories, even between the majority and minority participants. The study revealed common sentiments, experiences, and stories about inclusion across a diverse participant group. Even though the minority
population mentioned discrimination and bias, these things were not primary in their responses. Bias, racism, and other forms of discrimination are barriers to inclusion. However, mitigating these barriers doesn’t necessarily define the desired inclusion experience of employees. Even if one mitigates these barriers, it is possible not to have an inclusive environment if the inclusive leadership practices and inclusion experiences are not being created.

Beyond the findings, the process of conducting the research and writing this capstone has been one of the most significant development opportunities for me as a leader. As I was uncovering the insights from the interviews, I found that the themes described my own personal experience and helped me articulate what I’ve encountered as an employee. This study gave me the opportunity to identify and understand my confidence and inclusion triggers. Not only did I learn more about inclusive leadership through the interview process and literature review, I was able to enter into the experiences of other people through their own stories. This experience was much different than reading insights in research articles or analyzing survey data. I was able to get a view into how these fifteen individuals were affected by their environments and the interactions they had at work. Some shared inspirational examples while others conveyed emotional moments that made them question their abilities and value.

While listening to these narratives, I was struck by the perseverance and resilience of the participants. I never really reflected on how workplace interactions leave an impression on people’s minds and emotions. We experience ups and downs daily that we tend to absorb and not discuss. It was evident that inclusion and exclusion left conscious marks that many of the study participants did not forget or move on from. Many of the
participants actually mentioned that the interview process was very helpful for them and that they never reflected on these things before. Some felt it was a reminder for them to focus on being more inclusive. It was a gift to hear their personal experiences and I’m glad they benefited as well.

The process of writing the capstone has been a journey and being immersed in the research has shaped my leadership awareness. I have noticed many moments where I see interactions differently and I’m more sensitive to employee responses to inclusionary or exclusionary behaviors. I have developed a greater sense for what is happening around me when I’m in meetings and on virtual calls with leaders. Lately, I have been more conscious about asking questions, creating space for people to comment, and providing development assignments. I’ve also become more aware of the friendly coactive relationships I have and relationships that require further improvement. As I was learning more about inclusive leadership practices, I experimented in my leadership and can say that the insights from the research had a real positive impact on my role. As an example, I recently held a meeting where a lower level employee, whom I never met before, joined the call. She was asked to join the project and I could tell she was listening and trying to find her place in the team. I distinctly remember the research findings coming to my attention. I found myself deploying several practices to ensure her voice was heard, that she had a seat at the table, and I intentionally signaled that she had value and credibility to offer. The meeting ended with her taking on responsibility for an important piece of work. She later emailed me a few days later saying, “First of all, I wanted to thank you for being so gracious and kind at the meeting. As a new and unseasoned member, the way
you encouraged me to share was deeply appreciated.” It may seem small, but it is the daily moments at work that create inclusion.

I look forward to applying these findings in my personal life and I hope to build upon this research. I’ve made a personal commitment to submit this study for publication and to also begin developing a prototype curriculum. My aspiration would be to test the model more broadly. I also believe the research and literature used in this study could be relevant in future MSOD programming or as a topic of discussion in a current MSOD course. I truly believe the research can be transformational for people seeking to grow in their leadership or those that hold leadership positions. Another step I plan to take is to present my findings to the head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at my company and to the executive team of the business line I support.

It is clear from this study that leaders play an influential role in the experience of employees. I believe inclusive practices define the modern leader and I feel a sense of accountability to help leaders create the conditions for an inclusive environment. Inclusion is not just about reaching business outcomes. Inclusion is about affirming people so that they are confident in themselves and realize…they matter.
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APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Semi Structured Interview & Verbal Consent

Opening

Hello, my name is Bejoy Philip. Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. Do I have your permission to record your consent to participate and this interview?

{BEGIN RECORDING IF CONSENT TO RECORD IS GIVEN} I am currently a graduate student in the Organizational Dynamics Program at the University of Pennsylvania working on my Capstone project. I am examining inclusion in the workplace. The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. What you tell me will be confidential. I will be putting the data from these interviews together as research findings in my Capstone, but at no time will anyone I interview be identified in the Capstone. I may use some quotes from your interview. If I do I will make sure that that the quote is not identifiable (i.e., I will remove names, affiliations, etc.). I would like to record this interview with your permission. The reason for the recording is so that I can pay full attention to what you are saying without being distracted by taking notes. I will keep the recording for one year after I have finished my research and then I will erase it. Research data will be de-identified, and could be stored and distributed for future research. If you choose to leave the study at any time, all of your recorded data will be deleted immediately and not included in the research.

No one besides me will listen to the recording. You have the right to not answer a question or stop the interview at any time. Do you agree to continue with this interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?