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INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: MEDIATING ROLES OF AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND CREATIVITY

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We examined the mediating roles of affective organizational commitment and employee creativity in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement. Participants were 246 employees of 6 companies in the services industry in Vietnam, and they completed the Employee Work Engagement Scale, Inclusive Leadership Scale, Affective Organizational Commitment Scale, and Employee Creativity Scale. We found that inclusive leadership was positively related to employee work engagement, and that both affective organizational commitment and employee creativity mediated this relationship. Our findings represent a theoretical contribution to social exchange theory and provide useful managerial implications for organizations to improve work engagement among employees.

Keywords: inclusive leadership, employee work engagement, affective organizational commitment, employee creativity, social exchange theory.

Employee work engagement has been viewed as one of the most critical drivers of business success (Strom, Sears, & Kelly, 2014), and has been linked to several positive individual and business outcomes, including improved individual productivity, increased turnover for the business, improved organizational

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citizenship behaviors, greater managerial effectiveness, and increased customer satisfaction (Blomme, Kodden, & Beasley Suffolk, 2015). In contrast, employee disengagement leads to reduced productivity and higher costs. Nevertheless, the level of employee engagement in modern organizations is low. The results of a survey conducted by Gallup (2013) in 140 countries revealed that the global average percentage of work engagement was 13%. Only 30% of U.S. employees were engaged in their work, and the levels of engagement in Australia, South Korea, Japan, and China were reported as 24%, 11%, 7%, and 6%, respectively (Gallup, 2013). Studies of factors that influence work engagement are, thus, vital to improve organizational performance (Blomme et al., 2015).

Leadership is a major factor affecting work engagement (Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011) because leader behavior acts not only as a source of motivation and satisfaction for employees but also creates a healthy environment to support employee work engagement. However, few studies, especially empirical ones, have been conducted to examine the impact of specific leadership styles, for example, transformational (Ghadi, Fernando, & Caputi, 2013), authentic (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011), and ethical (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012), on employee work engagement. There has also been little research dedicated to investigating the influences of inclusive leadership. Moreover, in empirical studies of leadership and work engagement, the positive influences of transformational leadership, whereby the leader stresses motivating employees to achieve organizational goals (Ghadi et al., 2013), have been confirmed. However, differing work characteristics mean that different groups of employees prefer different styles of leadership. Bakker and colleagues (2011) have also suggested that an increase in the level of work engagement can be achieved by exercising a specific style of leadership. Further, Shuck and Herd (2012) stated that an implicit focus by the leader on meeting employee needs is crucial to creating an engaged workforce. In the present study, we argued that when the leader is using an inclusive style this may exert a considerable influence on work engagement because the leader is focused on fulfilling employee needs (Hollander, 2009). In addition, we examined the influences of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement—and the possible mediating effects of affective organizational commitment and employee creativity in this relationship—from the perspective of social exchange theory.

The main tenet of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) is that when one party performs a favor or does something that is valuable for another party, the receiving party will reciprocate with something equally valuable. Therefore, the relationship between leaders and employees may evolve into one of reciprocity (Strom et al., 2014). When an employee receives socioemotional resources from the leader of the organization—for example, through the leader using an inclusive leadership style—that employee feels obliged to repay the organization, and work engagement is one method of such repayment (Saks, 2006). Similarly,

drawing on social exchange theory, employees with positive perceptions about their leader have greater affective organizational commitment. Support from the leader increases the employee's sense of moral obligation to fulfill organizational objectives and may be reciprocated by a higher level of employee affective organizational commitment. Social exchange theory also sheds some light on the link between inclusive leadership and employee creativity. Support from, and rewards provided by, inclusive leaders to employees result in greater involvement by the employees in creative tasks and increased attachment to their organization (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010), which ultimately increases the chances of the survival of the organization (Lin & Liu, 2012). Intellectual and emotional support from inclusive leaders helps to shape and maintain work contexts that motivate employees to perform creative behaviors (Carmeli et al., 2010). Social exchange theory may, therefore, offer insight into the relationships among inclusive leadership, affective organizational commitment, employee creativity, and work engagement.

Development of Hypotheses

Inclusive Leadership and Work Engagement

An *inclusive leadership style* has been referred to as representing "leaders who exhibit openness, accessibility, and availability in their interactions with followers" (Carmeli et al., 2010, p. 250). Hollander (2009) regarded inclusive leadership as a mode of relational leadership in which the focus is on leaders listening and paying attention to followers' needs, and followers perceiving that leaders are available to them. In other words, inclusive leaders are always supportive of followers, and maintain open communication with them to invite input. These leaders exhibit concern about the interests, expectations, and feelings of their followers, and are available and willing to provide assistance (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Employee work engagement was defined by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (p. 74). *Vigor* concerns high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. *Dedication* is regarded as a sense of significance attributed to one's work, and *absorption* denotes the state of being wholly concentrated on, and deeply engrossed in, one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Inclusive leadership is positively associated with employee work engagement. First, under the lens of social exchange theory, inclusive leaders who exhibit openness, accessibility, and availability provide beneficial resources to employees. The perception that they are receiving these resources motivates employees

to reciprocate by applying themselves more fully to their work roles and devoting more cognitive, emotional, and physical resources to the organization. Therefore, in response to the receipt of beneficial resources, employees become more engaged in their work (Strom et al., 2014). Second, inclusive leaders challenge and encourage employees to make a greater contribution to their organization (Hollander, 2009). The provision of appropriate challenges and support by leaders has been shown to encourage followers to reach beyond their in-job requirements (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Third, by being open, available, and accessible to followers, inclusive leaders may increase employees' job satisfaction, which ultimately positively influences the employees' work engagement (Avery, McKay, & Wilson, 2007; Hollander, 2009). Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Inclusive leadership will be positively related to employee work engagement.

Inclusive Leadership and Affective Organizational Commitment

Affective organizational commitment is one of three facets of *organizational commitment*, which is made up of affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). It denotes the desire and willingness to stay with the organization (Kleine & Weißenberger, 2014).

Inclusive leadership may be linked to affective organizational commitment in three ways. First, inclusive leaders are open, listen and respond to follower opinions, value their contributions, and share their visions with followers, so that their followers are likely to experience feelings of empowerment, freedom, fairness, and trust (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). In the context of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), this favorable treatment motivates employees to reciprocate by exhibiting enhanced affective commitment to the organization (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Hung, Ansari, and Aafaqi (2004) found that when employees like and respect their supervisors, they exhibit a high level of affective organizational commitment. Second, inclusive leaders who perform supportive behaviors may meet employees' socioemotional needs for approval, esteem, and affiliation, which, in turn, leads to increased affective organizational commitment among those employees (Meyer, 2009). Lastly, when inclusive leaders behave in a supportive manner, this is appreciated by employees and their uncertainty, anxiety, and role stress are minimized (Hollander, 2009), thus enhancing employees' affective commitment to the organization. Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Inclusive leadership will be positively related to employees' affective organizational commitment.

Affective Organizational Commitment and Work Engagement

There are three possible explanations for the link between affective organizational commitment and work engagement. First, when they feel strong affective organizational commitment, employees feel obligated to the organization, so they work hard to achieve organizational goals and become more involved in organizational activities (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). They engage not only in beneficial in-role behaviors but also in beneficial extrarole behaviors (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Second, employees who are committed affectively to the organization tend to develop a positive attitude toward the tasks they are assigned. Because they like working for, and maintaining their role in, the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997), they value the tasks they are given and have a positive view of the work they do. Therefore, they become more willing to invest in their work, and want to perform better and stay with the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). The desire to maintain their role pushes them to put more effort into their work (Luchak & Gellatly, 2007). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Affective organizational commitment will be positively related to employee work engagement.

Inclusive Leadership and Employee Creativity

Creativity is seen as the production of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Hon, Bloom, & Crant, 2014) and concerns how flexibly and imaginatively individuals approach problems. In the business setting, creativity has been viewed as an important precedent of innovation and a key to gaining competitive advantages (Litchfield, Ford, & Gentry, 2014). Inclusive leadership is conducive to employee creativity in three ways. First, in the context of social exchange theory, when employees perceive that inclusive leaders offer them beneficial resources, they feel obliged to repay the leader. The desire to reciprocate encourages the employees to put effort into problem solving that often requires them to formulate useful and creative ideas (Lin & Liu, 2012). Second, supportive behaviors of inclusive leaders serve to shape positive social exchanges between leader and employees, which helps to develop employee expertise, cognitive thinking, and motivation to be engaged in creative work (Amabile et al., 1996; Carmeli et al., 2010). By being open to input from their employees and available to discuss new ideas, inclusive leaders supply employees with opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge, and cognitive thinking (Carmeli et al., 2010). Finally, Fredrickson (2001) has suggested that when employees experience positive feelings or emotions, their cognitions and actions are enhanced, resulting in novel and creative ideas. As the inclusive behaviors of leaders tend to lead to employees experiencing positive feelings and emotions (Hollander, 2009), the employees are likely to come up with novel

and creative ideas when their leader behaves inclusively. Thus, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Inclusive leadership will be positively related to employee creativity.

Employee Creativity and Work Engagement

Our proposal that creativity will positively influence employee work engagement is based firstly on the premise that creative employees are able to tolerate anxiety and think laterally, which helps them to be more focused on their work and, therefore, become more engaged. Second, when they exhibit creativity in their work, employees may receive compliments and respect from their supervisors, colleagues, and even customers (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005). As a result, the employees are more likely to experience a positive mood associated with their work, which makes them more enthusiastic and motivated to be engaged in their work (Avery et al., 2007). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Employee creativity will be positively related to their work engagement.

Mediating Roles of Affective Organizational Commitment and Employee Creativity in the Relationship Between Inclusive Leadership and Work Engagement

We have argued that inclusive leadership will positively influence work engagement through the mediator of affective organizational commitment. As inclusive leaders seek to meet employees' socioemotional needs in the organization, employees feel attached to the organization, and thereby more involved in activities to achieve organizational goals (Rhoades et al., 2001). Thus, inclusive leadership causes employees to be more engaged in their work via strong affective organizational commitment. In addition, when employees perceive that their opinions and inputs are genuinely valued by inclusive leaders, they feel secure enough to maintain their job in the organization (Detert & Burris, 2007), which means that they have formed a strong affective organizational commitment.

We also argued that inclusive leadership would positively influence work engagement through the mediator of increased employee creativity. Supportive behaviors of inclusive leaders, such as openness to input from employees and willingness to provide resources for employees, may enhance employee creativity (Amabile et al., 1996; Hollander, 2009). Positive exchanges between inclusive leaders and employees provide the employees with opportunities to develop expertise, cognitive thinking, and motivation to participate in creative work. Creativity helps employees to reduce uncertainty about the future of their

job, which makes them more engaged in their work. In addition, the supportive behaviors of inclusive leaders also lead to the forming of positive affect among employees, which helps to shape conditions for employees that will be conducive to coming up with novel and creative ideas (Fredrickson, 2001). When they perform creatively, employees have more opportunities to experience a positive mood associated with their work and organization (Avery et al., 2007). Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 6: Employees' affective organizational commitment will mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and the employees' work engagement.

Hypothesis 7: Employee creativity will mediate the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement.

Method

Participants

Employees of six Vietnamese companies in the services industry participated in this study. Of these companies, there were two focused on banking, two others in telecommunication, and the remaining two in hospitality. Each company had more than one branch in Vietnam, but we contacted only the main branches in the northern city of Hanoi for data collection because it is the city with the highest population in the country and the rates of employee concentration in services enterprises are high. Of the respondents, 69% were male, and 79% were aged between 25 and 39 years, 15% were aged under 25 years, and 6% were aged over 40 years. In terms of level of education, 6% had less than a bachelor's degree, 73% had a bachelor's degree, and 21% had a postgraduate degree. Most respondents (91%) worked between 40 and 60 hours per week, with the rest (9%) working between 20 and 40 hours per week. Finally, 1% of the respondents had a working tenure of 10 years in the organization where they were currently employed, 44% between 5 and 10 years, 37% between 2 and 5 years, and 18% less than 2 years. Out of 300 employees contacted for data collection, 258 returned their forms, for a response rate of 86%. Of these, 12 were invalid because of omitted and incorrect answers, so 246 valid responses were used for data analysis.

Measures

The items for each measure (employee work engagement, inclusive leadership, affective organizational commitment, and employee creativity) were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.

Employee Work Engagement Scale (EWE; Schaufeli et al., 2002). We measured employee work engagement using the nine-item EWE. Sample items are "Time flies when I am working", and "When I get up in the morning, I look

forward to going to work." In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate for the EWE was .979.

Inclusive Leadership Scale (ILS; Carmeli et al., 2010). Inclusive leadership behavior was measured using the nine-item ILS. Sample items are "The manager is open to hearing new ideas", and "The manager encourages me to access him/her on emerging issues." In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate for the ILS was .797.

Affective Organizational Commitment Scale (AOC; Meyer and Allen, 1997). We measured affective organizational commitment using the six-item AOC. Sample items are "I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization", and "I feel like part of the family at my organization." In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate for the AOC was .923.

Employee Creativity Scale (EC; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). We used the nine-item EC to measure employee creativity. Sample items are "I found new ideas for existing methods or equipment", and "I solved problems that had caused difficulties for other employees." In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate for the EC was .961.

Control variables. It has been suggested that the level of employees' work engagement may be influenced by personal characteristics, such as gender (Avery et al., 2007), age (Schaufeli et al., 2002), level of education (Avery et al., 2007), working hours, and organizational tenure (Thorsteinson, 2003). Therefore, we controlled for each of these variables. Gender was a dummy variable (1 for men, 2 for women). Age was measured in years. Level of education was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*middle school or below*) to 4 (*graduate school or above*). Organizational tenure was measured using respondents' self-reported years of working in the organization.

Results

Before testing the hypotheses, common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test for all items based on the method described by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). Our results suggest that no general factor emerged to account for the majority of the variance; in fact, the largest factor explained 36.148% of the variance. Therefore, common method bias did not affect this analysis. In addition, variance inflation factors (VIF) were calculated to check for multicollinearity. VIF values ranged from 1.043 to 1.657, and these are all lower than the upper limit of 10.0 (Neter, Wasserman, & Kutner, 1989). Therefore, multicollinearity issues did not affect this analysis. The reliability of the constructs was tested using Cronbach's alpha (α), and these ranged from .797 to .979. These results indicate that most measures showed adequate internal consistency. To ensure the discriminant validity, we also carried

out confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by calculating goodness-of fit index (GFI), incremental fit index (IFI), normed fit index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and root mean square residual (RMR). The CFA results indicated that the four-factor model had a better level of fit than did the other models (χ^2/df = 1.714; GFI = .909; IFI = .991; RMR = .026; RMSEA = .054; NFI = .979; TLI = .990; CFI = .991). This indicates that the four variables had acceptable discriminant validity.

We used structural equation modeling to examine the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement, and the mediating roles of affective organizational commitment and employee creativity in this relationship. The values (see Table 1) collectively suggested that the model fitted well (Hu & Bentler, 1999). As shown in Table 1, Hypotheses 1 to 5 were all supported.

Table 1. *Standardized Estimates From the Structural Model*

Paths Direct effects	Coefficient	*t*	Outcome
Inclusive leadership → Work engagement (H1)	.143*	2.306	Supported
Inclusive leadership → Affective organizational commitment (H2)	.280***	4.242	Supported
Affective organizational commitment → Work engagement (H3)	.203**	3.123	Supported
Inclusive leadership → Employee creativity (H4)	.166**	2.677	Supported
Employee creativity → Work engagement (H5)	.288***	3.840	Supported
Mediating effects	**Indirect**	**Direct**	**Degree of mediation (partial vs. full)**
	Coefficient		
Inclusive leadership → Affective organizational commitment → Work engagement (H6)	.056**	.248**	Partial
Inclusive leadership → Employee creativity → Work engagement (H7)	.047**		Partial

χ^2 = 275.605 (*df* = 130, *p* = .001); RMR = .026; GFI = .898; CFI = .986; RMSEA = .068; NFI = .974; IFI = .986; TLI = .984.

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

To test for the roles of affective organizational commitment and employee creativity as mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement, we conducted a bootstrapping test with a sample of 5,000. The results in Table 1 show that both affective organizational commitment and employee creativity had roles as partial mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement. Accordingly, Hypotheses 6 and 7 were supported.

Discussion

In the existing literature regarding leadership, scholars suggest that a specific leadership style can foster a highly motivated workforce (Bakker et al., 2011); accordingly, in our study, we found that using an inclusive style of leadership was an effective way to make the employees more engaged. Carmeli et al. (2010) found that the characteristics of inclusive leaders, such as openness, accessibility, and availability, make employees feel more motivated to engage in work. Our findings are also congruent with those of Saks (2006) and Chughtai and Buckley (2008), indicating that leaders' behaviors have significant effects on the level of employee work engagement.

By examining a previously underexplored facet of leadership in relation to work engagement in our study, we have made a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on leadership and work engagement. Although many previous researchers have focused on the role of leadership in work engagement in empirical studies, they have paid particular attention to how a transformational leadership style can spur employee work engagement (Ghadi et al., 2013). In studies on transformational leadership, the focus has been on how leaders motivate followers to become more committed to organizational goals (Kanungo, 2001). However, using an inclusive style of leadership may constitute another path through which leaders can increase employee work engagement by attending to follower needs (Hollander, 2009). This observation is in line with previous calls to focus on follower needs when creating an engaged workforce (Shuck & Herd, 2012).

According to the findings of both Bates (2004) and Saks (2006), employee work engagement positively influences individual and organizational outcomes, including productivity, turnover, organizational citizenship behaviors, managerial effectiveness, and customer satisfaction. By demonstrating a significant link between inclusive leadership and work engagement, we raise the possibility that inclusive leadership positively affects organizational outcomes by increasing employee work engagement. We believe that future studies are warranted, in which researchers examine the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between inclusive leadership and outcomes within the organization.

Theoretical Implications

Our study has three primary theoretical implications. First, our findings provide a basis for an extension to social exchange theory. Although social exchange theory has largely been used as a theoretical lens to explain the link between leadership and work engagement (Blau, 1964; Saks, 2006; Wang, 2008), our results suggest that this theory may also help to explain the influences of inclusive leadership on other variables, like affective organizational commitment

and employee creativity. Our results also underline the promise of affective organizational commitment and employee creativity as mediating variables in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement and, thus, as an underlying mechanism fostering work engagement. Both of these constructs have commonly been studied as outcomes (Amabile et al., 2005; Dutton, 2003), but our findings may actuate researchers to include them as mediating constructs when they examine a variety of relationships.

Managerial Implications

Our findings also indicate that, in order to enhance employee work engagement, managers need to raise supervisor awareness of the positive effects of inclusive leadership on employee work engagement, so that supervisors will have greater commitment to the application of this type of leadership at work. Furthermore, managers should provide immediate supervisors with a program of training, performance assessment, and a reward system regarding the practices of inclusive leadership that will help them to effectively exhibit openness, accessibility, and availability with their employees. To maximize the effectiveness of inclusive leadership, managers also need to make various efforts, such as offering organizational rewards, ensuring procedural justice, promoting supervisor support, and putting in place an organizational learning system to facilitate employees' affective organization commitment and employee creativity.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

A limitation in our research was that our study had a cross-sectional design. Future researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to verify our findings. A second limitation is that the ratings of all variables were collected from the same group of employees, which may have resulted in inflated relationships because of single-source effects. We encourage future researchers to collect data from various sources. Third, we conducted our fieldwork with Vietnamese service companies, so we recommend caution when generalizing the findings to other type of firms (e.g., in the manufacturing industry) or organizations in different countries or cultures. To increase the generalizability, future researchers should conduct studies with larger and more generalized samples. Another path for future research is to examine variables other than those we examined in this study as mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee work engagement.

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