



**Enabling Factors and Support Mechanisms in the Emergence of Inclusive
Organisational Brand Leadership Optimal for Innovation and Change**



Thesis

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The Independent Institute of Education, Vega School

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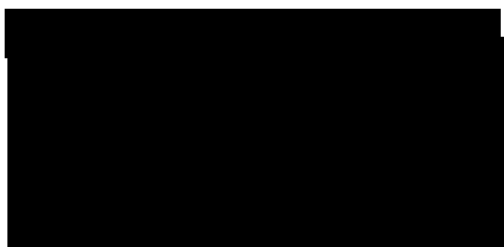
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18 / 02 / 2026



DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK

I declare that Enabling Factors and Support Mechanisms in the Emergence of Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Optimal for Innovation and Change is my personal work and that all known sources utilised or quoted have been acknowledged and indicated by means of references.



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Date: 8-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This study explores inclusive leadership as the style that shapes organisational brand cultures suited for innovation and change. These cultures navigate complexity and enable adaptable employees who drive stakeholder-centric innovation. Stakeholder-centric innovation is the key challenge for organisations today. Organisational brand cultures result from leadership influence, not isolated branding efforts. This study reframes organisational brand leadership as leadership. It explores inclusive leadership to enable inclusive organisational brand leadership.

Organisational brand leaders lack sufficient guidance to integrate inclusion into their practices. This gap blocks inclusive organisational brand leadership and threatens innovation, equity, and sustainability. The study bridges this gap by examining inclusive leadership to support inclusive organisational brand leadership.

The study uses an exploratory qualitative design with interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology. It explores lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with 23 leaders recognised by Business Engage (NPC) for inclusion. This process creates an interpretive theory of the inclusion journey.

Inclusive empathy forms the core of inclusive leadership. The study introduces the Inclusive Empathy Model, a guide to, and reconceptualisation of inclusive leadership. Inclusive leadership relies on inclusive empathy, respect, authenticity, and Emotional Intelligence (EI). These elements drive collaborative and stakeholder-centric innovation.

Authenticity, based on self-awareness and self-acceptance, builds trust, adaptability, creativity and innovation. It creates belonging for all individuals. The study led to the development of the Sequential Journey to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model as a roadmap for this process.

Organisations are urged to embed inclusion in brand cultures via inclusively empathetic leadership. This approach manages change, builds competitive advantage, and supports a connected future. Inclusive organisational brand leadership requires training, coaching, and mentorship.

The study shows that the cultivation of inclusive organisational brand leadership requires the internal transformation of leaders. This enables a new type of organisational brand leader to support inclusion, stakeholder-centric innovation, better business, and a better world.

Key concepts: innovative work behaviour, internal brand building, organisational brand leadership, inclusive leadership, leading for change, inclusive empathy

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Innovation, and more specifically innovation that serves all stakeholders (Iizuka & Hane, 2021), has been recognised as a defining priority for organisations today (Vladić, Maletič & Maletič, 2021). Branding has shifted from a product focus to an organisational brand focus on stakeholder ecosystems, where leaders commit to co-creating value (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022).

According to Wood (2020), stakeholder-centric innovation empowers all to thrive sustainably in this rapidly evolving age. In order to meet the needs of stakeholders, leadership skills are increasingly sought after and critical to organisational success (Minbashrazgah, Garbollah & Varmaghani, 2021).

The outcome of leadership – not isolated to marketing brand leadership (Lauer, 2018; Prashar & Maity, 2024) – manifests in internal and external brand building. However, internal brand building is considered a more powerful driver of organisational identity, purpose, innovation, and sustainable brand equity (Düger, 2019; Minbashrazgah et al., 2021; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022; Prashar & Maity, 2024).

Leadership can thus be considered synonymous with organisational brand leadership, which is distinct from marketing brand leadership. It is a responsibility shared across leadership levels (Prashar & Maity, 2024).

As a means of transmitting brand promises, this study seeks to explore organisational brand leadership through the lens of leadership via employee engagement, internal branding, and brand citizenship behaviour, that culminate in the organisational brand (Morhart, Herzog & Tomczak, 2009; Prashar & Maity, 2024).

Leaders are therefore organisational brand leaders, and the terms will be used interchangeably. Figure 1 illustrates the influence of leadership on the organisational brand.

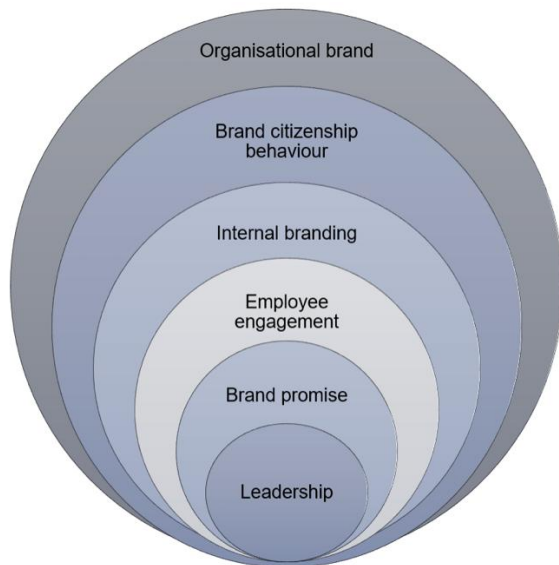


Figure 1: Influence of leadership on the organisational brand (Constructed by researcher)

Leadership theory is integral to internal brand building, as it facilitates the translation of the commitments of a brand into tangible outcomes and behaviours through employee engagement. The evolving landscape of effective leadership now demands a redefinition of leadership, aligning it with internal brand building and creativity (Vukadinović, 2022). Eddy, Van Der Linden, and Hartman (2022) and Yarbrough (2023) emphasise the necessity to redefine leadership to achieve organisational goals through brand citizenship behaviour. All leaders are organisational brand leaders, as they influence brand citizenship behaviours and ensure that a consistent brand promise is transmitted through the organisational brand to all stakeholders (Figure 1).

This transition entails embracing creativity and collaboration to evolve from traditional hierarchical or positional leadership styles, towards more participatory and inclusive approaches that are suited for complexity (Eddy *et al.*, 2022; Yarbrough, 2023). In the past, leaders were primarily developed to function in more stable and profitable environments where technical expertise held greater

value and where branding was the domain of marketing. However, in navigating today's increasingly complex and uncertain business climates, leaders are called upon to operate as organisational brand leaders with empathy, compassion, vulnerability, gratitude, self-awareness, and self-care (Randel, 2023). They must also ensure that they provide psychological safety so that their employees can collaborate, innovate, and raise pertinent issues as needed (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Vladić *et al.*, 2021).

In a dynamic and unpredictable business environment, branding shifts from a singular outward looking department, to being at the heart of organisational reputation and business strategy. By extension, it becomes the responsibility of all leaders (Lauer, 2018; Vukadinović, 2022). This study seeks to explore inclusive leadership as the optimal leadership style for translating the commitments of a brand into reality through internal brand building. Brand creation and building extend beyond traditional marketing strategies that focus on the brand as a product or service, and rather encompass the broader organisational ecosystem through the concept of the organisational brand (Enslin, Wolfswinkel & Terblanche-Smit, 2023).

1.2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Organisational brand leaders are being called upon to lead in new ways and to solve increasingly complex problems in a rapidly evolving world through innovation in a manner that serves all stakeholders. This stakeholder-centric approach is best visualised in Figure 2, which places value at the centre of the model. It illustrates the idea that authentic innovation goes beyond customer satisfaction and profit, it generates value that benefits all stakeholders.

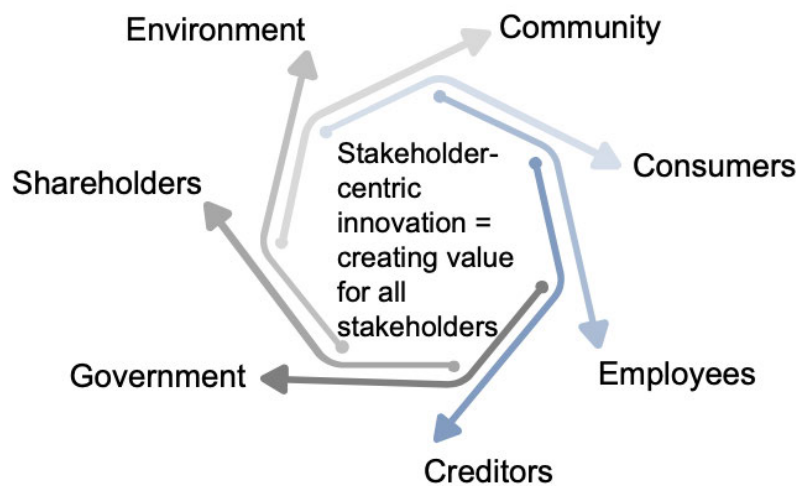


Figure 2: Stakeholder-centric innovation (Constructed by researcher)

An organisational brand culture suited for complexity is considered an inclusive organisational brand culture and acts as an enabler of innovation that serves all stakeholders (Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Korkmaz, Van Engen, Knappert & Schalk, 2022; Randel, 2023). Stakeholder-centric innovation can address increasingly complex problems and serve all stakeholders within the organisational system to achieve optimal sustainability (Iizuka & Hane, 2021). This type of innovation enables everyone to thrive and adapt to the ever-increasing technological growth being observed (Wood, 2020). Rapid technological advancements are driving human biological, psychological, and sociological evolution and organisational brand leadership exerts the most considerable influence on a brand's capacity to innovate (Wood, 2020; Vladić *et al.*, 2021).

As organisational brand leaders face more complex demands, developing personal skills, such as empathy, the ability to see the world through another's perspective, becomes pivotal to creating inclusive and innovative organisational brand cultures. Iglesias and Ind (2020) identify empathy as a crucial requirement for the transformative leadership necessary to develop conscientious brands capable of addressing the complexity of existing problems. To meet these new demands of organisational brand leadership, organisational brand leaders must cultivate heightened levels of inner awareness or Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a

precursor to accepting the world through the lens of another (Thompson, 2010; Randel, 2023). Floricica and Tasente (2022) describe the acceptance of self, the environment, and others, termed inclusion, as a force for change.

The purpose of this study is to explore inclusive leadership as a leadership style capable of supporting innovative organisational brand cultures suited for complexity, the result of which is adaptable employees with the potential to create innovation that serves all stakeholders (Randel, 2023). Inclusive organisational brand leadership stands out as a style capable of enhancing innovation through; a growth mindset, knowledge, agility, collaboration, and empowerment (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024).

Currently, the literature provides insufficient insight into what enables the development of inclusion in an organisational brand leader. Inclusivity is essential for cultivating adaptable employees capable of driving stakeholder-centric innovation (Randel, 2023). Additionally, there is a need for further research to identify the supporting behaviours, skills, beliefs, and values that facilitate such leadership (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). This research draws from a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing marketing, branding, psychology, human resources, innovative work behaviour, organisational culture and leadership.

1.2.1. Problem statement

Organisational brand leaders lack guidance to integrate inclusion into their leadership style. They need direction on skills and behaviours to address complex problems through stakeholder-centric innovation.

This gap prevents the rise of inclusive organisational brand leadership, which drives sustainable innovation.

Prior studies highlight benefits of inclusion but overlook the ways that leaders could cultivate it intrinsically and extrinsically. Literature focuses on environmental experiences rather than the roles of leaders. Further research must identify enabling factors for inclusion across industries and structures to support this leadership transition.

1.2.2. Study questions

The study is guided by the following questions, which aim to investigate the mechanisms that shape the emergence of inclusion in organisational brand leadership.

1.2.2.1. What enables the emergence of inclusion in an organisational brand leader?

1.2.2.1.1. What is inclusive organisational brand leadership?

1.2.2.1.2. What enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader?

Inclusive leadership is a relational approach characterised by openness, accessibility, appreciated, effective communication, active listening, and the conscious empowerment of others through dialogue and feedback (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). This sense of inclusion cultivates psychological contracts that encourage innovative solutions, creative work behaviours, and optimal organisational adaptation to change, thereby enhancing sustainable performance and societal contribution (Javed, Abdullah, Zaffar, ul Haque & Rubab, 2019; Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Yikilmaz, 2023).

1.3. APPROACH OF THE STUDY

The study adopts a philosophical orientation that integrates interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology, focusing on the subjective realities and meanings associated with the inclusive leadership experiences of 23 leaders recognised by Business Engage Non-Profit Corporation (NPC) as Inclusive Leaders. Utilising a qualitative research design, the methodology employed semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights, allowing for the co-construction of meaning between the participants and the researcher. The research aimed to derive an interpretative theory through the comparative analysis of the participants' experiences, emphasising the context and depth of their journeys toward inclusion without testing pre-existing theories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach acknowledged the influence of the researcher's values and biases and implemented strategies to mitigate these effects while ensuring the richness and validity of the findings.

This subsection outlines the foundational approach of the study, which is rooted in qualitative inquiry. It begins by establishing the philosophical orientations that underpin the research, including epistemology, ontology, axiology, and theoretical stance. These guide how knowledge is constructed, how reality is understood, and how values and biases are managed. This is followed by a description of the study's theoretical orientation and the methodological steps taken to collect, analyse, and interpret the data. These orientations form a coherent framework that supports the aim of generating a grounded, interpretative theory of inclusive leadership.

1.3.1. Philosophical orientation

The interpretivist epistemological orientation focused on the subjective realities of participants and the meanings they associated with their experiences of inclusive leadership (Boeije, 2010). This approach emphasised the importance of understanding how individuals interpret their experiences within their specific contexts. The research methodology was rooted in constructivist grounded theory, highlighting the co-construction of meaning between the participants and the researcher (Babbie, 2014).

The 23 leaders selected for this study are the national finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award in Southern Africa as vetted and issued by Business Engage Non-Profit Corporation (NPC), over the past four years. Business Engage is an NPC operating across Southern Africa and is focused on inclusive growth through inclusive diversity, specifically gender inclusion. Annually, Business Engage NPC present an award to the most Inclusive Leader(s) across various categories.

According to Business Engage NPC the Inclusive Leader Award (2025) is awarded to a male or female leader demonstrating exceptional commitment to advancing inclusion and belonging, in the sphere of their influence. These leaders don't just advocate for inclusion; they take action, implementing policies, mentoring talent, or reshaping cultures to ensure everyone has a seat at the table. Nominations for this award are submitted in writing by individuals or groups, accompanied by evidence supporting their claims. This evidence undergoes a

rigorous peer review by a panel of business leaders across Southern Africa, after which each nominee is interviewed before the judges reach a unanimous decision on the finalists and winners. This thorough selection process underscores the significance of the leaders' experiences and contributions to the field of inclusive leadership, providing a rich context for further research.

1.3.1.1. Epistemological orientation

The epistemological position of this study is interpretivist. This orientation recognises that knowledge is constructed through interpretation and dialogical processes, rather than being an objective, external entity (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1998). The aim was to generate an interpretative theory that captured the experiences and meanings of each leader's journey toward inclusive leadership.

Meaning is deduced or interpreted from people's experiences and their behaviour as an output (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1998). Human reality is created through 'interpretation and dialogical processes' (Jordaan & Jordan, 1998:60). By comparing the data obtained from all 23 participants, the researcher sought to generate an interpretative theory that reflected the nuanced and subjective experiences of each leader (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021). This theory was grounded in the comparative analysis of the data, focusing on the context and depth of each participant's journey toward inclusive leadership (Boeije, 2010).

1.3.1.2. Ontological orientation

The ontological orientation of this study is constructivist, set in constructivist grounded theory, which emphasises the co-construction of meaning between the participants and the researcher (Babbie, 2014). This approach recognises that reality is not an objective entity but is shaped through interactions and interpretations within social contexts.

'Grounded theory is mostly used to study human behaviour by way of comparative analysis' (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021:208), allowing for the nuanced understanding of individual experiences. 'Grounded theory originated from the

collaboration of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (bringing together) positivism and interactionism' (Babbie, 2014:308), to create a framework that values subjective experiences (Babbie, 2014).

In this study, the researcher drove theoretical insights from the patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the comparative analysis of multiple viewpoints. This process enabled the development of theory that is rooted in the collected data (Boeije, 2010). Rather than testing pre-existing theories, the researcher aimed to explore the context and depth of each participant's journey toward inclusion, focusing on their unique perspectives within the realm of executive leadership (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This ontological stance underscored the importance of understanding how meanings are constructed through dialogue and interaction, providing a rich framework for analysing inclusive leadership.

1.3.1.3. Axiological orientation

The axiological orientation of this study acknowledges the inherent values and biases that influenced the research process. Given the interpretivist epistemological position and the constructivist ontological stance, it was crucial to recognise that the researcher's perspective cannot be entirely separated from the subjective realities being examined. This interconnection meant that the researcher's interpretations may have been shaped by the researcher's own values and experiences (Bless, Higson & Sithole, 2013).

To address potential researcher bias, the study implemented several strategies aimed at ensuring the accuracy of the data interpretation. One key approach involved verifying findings with participants to confirm that the researcher's understanding aligned with their perspectives, while avoiding leading questions and tonal variations that could have implied bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher utilised Atlas.ti software, which assisted in eliminating personal markers that could have potentially triggered conscious or unconscious bias during analysis (Babbie, 2014).

Despite these efforts, it is acknowledged that the complete mitigation of bias may not have been possible, and such biases could potentially have distorted the findings. This concern is further compounded by the researcher's affiliation with Business Engage NPC, which may have influenced interpretations and interactions within the study. The researcher personally committed to remaining as impartial, objective and neutral throughout the research process, as consciously possible. An awareness of these axiological considerations was essential for the integrity and validity of the research outcomes.

1.3.2. Theoretical orientation

The exploration of inclusive leadership was grounded in an inductive qualitative approach, focused on developing new theories from observations rather than testing existing hypotheses (Boeije, 2010; Babbie, 2014). The primary objective of this research was to facilitate the emergence of new theoretical insights, focusing on understanding the complexities of inclusive leadership rather than the validation of pre-existing theories (Boeije, 2010; Bless *et al.*, 2013).

In this study, the researcher derived theoretical insights from identified themes, patterns, and categories that emerged from the data collected. This data was obtained through a comparative analysis of the diverse perspectives of the 23 participants interviewed (Babbie, 2014). The researcher systematically compared the insights from all participants, allowing for a rich understanding of the phenomenon (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

The identified themes, categories, and patterns have been meaningfully displayed in a systematic and iterative manner, ensuring a thorough exploration of the data (Boeije, 2010). The researcher aimed to uncover the meanings that leaders associated with their journeys toward inclusive leadership, providing a nuanced understanding of their experiences (Boeije, 2010). The interpretation of these results contributed to conceptual modelling and the development of a new theoretical framework in the field of organisational brand leadership within the theoretical field of organisational leadership (Boeije, 2010).

1.3.3. Methodological orientation

This study adopted a qualitative research design utilising semi-structured interviews with the 23 finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award. To facilitate the collection of qualitative data, semi-structured interview discussion guides were developed (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). The interview structure was neither conversational nor standardised, instead it explored certain themes through pre-determined questions, which allowed for some flexibility with unstructured probing or clarifying questions (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, recorded, and transcribed for coding and analysis (Boeije, 2010). The raw interview data was organised and prepared for analysis, following the guidelines set forth by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Open-ended questions, grounded in the literature, explored the participants' journeys into leadership and how they cultivated inclusion, remaining open to the nuances of their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher focused on addressing the research objectives, namely to establish what inclusive organisational brand leadership is, and what enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader.

This study used the constant comparative method in an iterative cycle of data collection, analysis, and sampling to explore how inclusive leadership is expressed across different contexts (Boeije, 2010). Data from semi-structured interviews were reduced by selecting relevant excerpts, which were then coded and analysed using Atlas.ti. This analysis supported the identification of sentiment, categories, themes, patterns, and thematic variables (Castro, Kellison, Boyd & Kopak, 2010), with coding transforming raw data into a structured and interpretable format (Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

The coding process involved open coding, where the researcher initially labelled concepts, followed by reanalysis to identify key concepts through axial coding, and finally selective coding to assess the central concept (Babbie, 2014). Coding was essential for data management, ensuring that themes and categories were meaningfully summarised and easily retrievable (Boeije, 2010). This analysis was

supported by prominence rankings generated by Atlas.ti. These rankings serve only as a descriptive scaffold to aid thematic analysis and interpretation, not as a quantitative metric, thus aligning with qualitative epistemology.

To ensure category reliability, the researcher ensured distinct (Boeije, 2010), clear and specific category definitions which were tested against the literature (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). To maintain validity the researcher actively avoided bias and assumptions and was clear on the research context for optimal transferability (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

The sampling strategy was theoretical and purposive, with saturation being reached when no new patterns or themes were identified in the interview data, indicating that the sample was an adequate sample size (Boeije, 2010; Bless *et al.*, 2013). While the data may not be generalised across all leadership contexts, they can be generalised within the context of inclusive leadership due to the rigour of the vetting process and the nature of the sample (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

1.4. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

Organisational brand leaders are expected to solve increasingly complex challenges through innovative approaches that serve a broad range of stakeholders. This requires guidance in cultivating the inclusive mindsets, behaviours, skills, and values that underpin effective inclusive leadership.

Current literature lacks insight into what enables inclusion development in organisational brand leaders (Randel, 2023). This gap hinders cultivation of adaptable employees for stakeholder-centric innovation. Further research must identify supporting behaviours, skills, beliefs, and values (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022).

This study aimed to address these gaps by exploring the factors that shape inclusive leadership in organisational brand leaders, with the goal of empowering them to promote adaptability and stakeholder-focused innovation within their teams. By adopting inclusive leadership approaches that emphasise psychological empowerment, psychological safety, and inclusive cultures,

organisations can build strong, authentic brands that support innovation and create value for all stakeholders. This study does not, however, claim causal generalisability, cross-industry representativeness, or an applicability to leaders at various developmental stages.

1.5. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY

The theoretical underpinnings of the study will explore internal brand building, brand citizenship, and factors influencing employee openness to change, creativity, and innovation. It explores the role of various leadership styles and behaviours in cultivating inclusive cultures that support innovation.

The theoretical underpinnings were organised into five parts:

1. internal brand building and brand citizenship behaviour
2. innovative work behaviour
3. inclusive leadership, psychological empowerment, and safety for innovation
4. inclusive organisational brand culture and human resource practices for innovation
5. stakeholder-centric innovation

These areas collectively inform the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2.

1.5.1. Internal brand building and brand citizenship behaviour

Internal brand building refers to the efforts made by organisations to align employees with the organisational brand values and commitments, enhancing stakeholder loyalty to the brand and bolstering organisational success. To achieve this brand citizenship behaviour is required, which refers to employee behaviour that aligns with brand values and commitments, contributing to internal brand building and organisational success. The growing importance of internal brand building is the result of an evolution in branding and organisational brand leadership.

1.5.1.1. Brand evolution

Iglesias and Ind (2020) and Von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis and Mühlbacher (2017) refer to a paradigm shift in marketing from organisationally controlled customer-focused brand management to reciprocal stakeholder brand co-creation. Siano, Vollero and Bertolini (2022) describe the field of branding as constantly evolving and note this shift from brand control to brand co-creation with stakeholders as a significant development in brand research. This shift not only challenges traditional approaches to brand management but also underscores the importance of understanding and meeting the needs of both internal and external stakeholders. Iglesias and Ind (2020) introduce the theme of responsible, sustainable, or conscientious brands, citing Danone, SAP, Tata, Unilever, Dilmah Tea, and Patagonia as frontrunners in this emerging field.

Siano *et al.* (2022) highlight businesses like Lego, DeWalt and Autodesk as leaders in brand co-creation, specifically involving their customers in the creation of new products and services, which enhances consumer belonging and loyalty. Brand co-creation also extends to employees, ensuring that a brand's identity consistently aligns with the organisation's values and aspirations, especially during employee interactions with customers (Chung & Byrom, 2021, Siano *et al.*, 2022), resulting in a more authentic brand (Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021).

Notably, companies like Unilever and DeWalt actively solicit ideas and insights from their employees (Chung & Byrom, 2021). In fact, Nguyen *et al.* (2021) posit that employee brand co-creation serves as a precursor to customer brand co-creation. Chung and Byrom (2021) further emphasise that employee brand co-creation motivates employees to align with the brand identity, fostering stronger emotional bonds with the brand and consequently boosting customer loyalty.

Bhargava and Bedi (2021) argue that branding has evolved from a emphasis on customers' perceptions to viewing a brand as a series of expectations, akin to a promise made by an organisation. The customer's perception of that promise is shaped through sensory experiences related to the brand – what the customer

hears, sees, and feels when encountering the brand, including interactions with the employees who represent that brand. This perspective extends from external brand positioning for customers to internal brand positioning for employees (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). What a brand promises regarding the values it professes to uphold becomes an expectation for stakeholders, which is then compared in their minds to the creation of a brand image (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Any dissonance between the brand promise and the brand image could result in a breach of trust, especially when stakeholders select brands that align with their own identities and aspirations (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021).

Daszkiewicz (2022) notes a social trend toward self-acceptance in the post-pandemic period. Brands have responded to this shift by promoting positive self-perceptions, self-care, self-acceptance, authenticity, as well as equity, diversity, and inclusion. According to Daszkiewicz (2022), this shift has led brands to focus less on positioning products as a means of expressing self-worth and more on supporting customers in accepting and expressing themselves. To ensure this brand promise is authentic and does not breach stakeholder trust, it would imply that organisational brand employees and leaders would need to lead the way in accepting and expressing themselves, necessitating an inclusive organisational brand culture.

This shift in branding discourse can be conceptualised as an upward spiral of brand evolution, illustrating a progression from traditional brand management to more inclusive and authentic brand expressions. This is summarised in Figure 3.

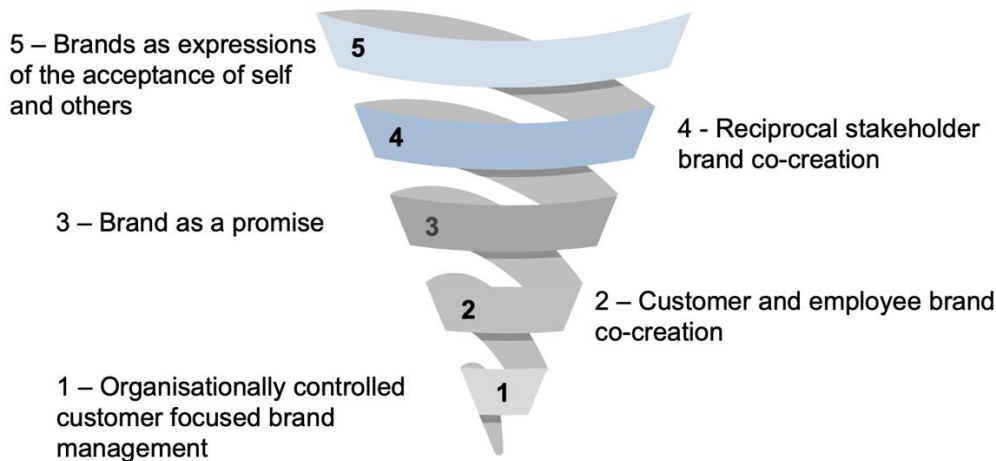


Figure 3: The evolution of branding (Constructed by researcher)

1.5.1.2. Internal brand building and organisational brand leadership

In the current competitive climate, external brand building alone is insufficient for creating and sustaining a brand (Düger, 2019). This necessitates a brand orientation, where the organisational strategy is based on the brand, with internal brand building being the transfer of the brand's commitments into reality through employee-driven action, under the guidance of leadership (Milić, Stefanović & Vujičić, 2014; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021).

Organisational brand leadership could be defined as a component of leadership specifically pertaining to meeting the stakeholder needs of the brand through strategy and employee reward and punishment. Brand creation, awareness, enhancement and sustainability is no longer solely the domain of marketing but requires input and focus from all leaders within the organisation (Lauer, 2018; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Organisational brand leadership skills are increasingly sought after to meet stakeholder needs, and top management and supervisors play a significant role in shaping employee brand behaviours and attitudes (Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021).

This process integrates marketing principles with human resource practices, guided by leadership, to ensure continuity, increase employee engagement, and ultimately enhance both organisational and brand performance (Düger, 2019; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022).

Organisational brand leadership is integral to brand building and operates at both a macro level, involving the Board and Chief Executive Officer, and a micro level, encompassing executives and leaders (Prashar & Maity, 2024). To ensure the success of internal brand building, leaders at all levels must, understand, support and consistently commit to the internal brand sustainability and enhancement process (Shaari, Md Salleh & Hussin, 2015).

1.5.2. Innovative work behaviour

Leadership actions guide and support employee behaviours that drive organisational innovation and contribute to overall success. According to Yikilmaz (2023), innovative work behaviour is a form of extra role behaviour, i.e. voluntary actions beyond formal job responsibilities, which emerges as an outcome of brand citizenship. Brand citizenship refers to employees' voluntary actions that support the brand's values and promise, contributing to brand consistency, innovation, and overall brand success (Burmam, Zeplin & Riley, 2009).

1.5.2.1. Innovation

Within the context of a traditional corporate brand-customer relationship, innovation can be defined as an exchange of value (Iglesias & Ind, 2020) between the corporate brand and the customer. The customer receives what they value in the form of a product or service, that is technologically viable, financially feasible and for which a business model exists, and the corporate brand receives what they value in terms of remuneration (Brown, 2008). Innovation is human-centred and focused on creating value that is meaningful beyond the individual or organisation initiating the innovation (Brown, 2008). Vladić *et al.* (2021) define innovation as encompassing several types of innovation, involving a variety of stakeholders which includes incremental versus disruptive innovation and external customers versus internal customers. Regardless of the type of innovation or the type of stakeholder involved, innovation always involves an exchange of value.

The contemporary business environment calls for brand value that is sustainable and inclusive of all stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Wood, 2020), aligning with the United Nation's (UN's) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Iizuka & Hane, 2021). A brand that seeks to understand the needs and desires of, and serves value to, all stakeholders is considered a conscious and conscientious brand (Iglesias & Ind, 2020) (Figure 2). To generate value throughout the ecosystem, an organisation must create an environment able to gather input from all stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Vladić *et al.*, 2021). An inclusive organisational brand culture is better positioned to elicit and harness diverse input, providing a richer environment where employees have the freedom to contribute their unique skills and ideas while respecting those of others (Vladić *et al.*, 2021; Randel, 2023). Within this environment exists a heightened ability to inspire, generate, and implement higher-quality ideas for the purpose of innovation. This creates a culture that can withstand societal and economic instability (Vladić *et al.*, 2021).

1.5.3. Inclusive leadership, psychological empowerment, and safety for innovation

Inclusive leaders instil a sense of belonging, psychological empowerment and safety, motivating employees to engage in innovative and change-oriented behaviours. Psychological empowerment refers to the degree to which employees feel a sense of influence and control over their workplace environment, leading to increased engagement and innovative work behaviour; a workplace environment where employees are safe to take risks and share ideas in the absence of a fear of punitive consequences.

1.5.3.1. Leading for innovation

Leadership theory has thus evolved towards inclusive, team-oriented approaches that support innovation by encouraging risk-taking, continuous learning, achieving excellence, and embracing opportunities (Wong, Wang, Wang & Tjosvold, 2019; Eddy *et al.*, 2022). The current complex climate is calling for inclusive leaders who are transformational, entrepreneurial, responsible, ethical, and service-centric.

This approach cultivates employees who become effective brand ambassadors, demonstrating brand citizenship behaviour (Shaari *et al.*, 2015). Rehman, Salleh and Ahmad (2019) describe brand citizenship behaviour as extra-role behaviour that is vital for delivering the brand promise (Düger, 2019) and encouraging innovation (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). A brand is expressed through leaders who model brand-oriented behaviours (Lauer, 2018), and strong employee–leader relationships enhance brand commitment, a key aspect of brand citizenship. The primary responsibility for aligning employee behaviour with brand values rests with human resource management and leadership (Düger, 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023).

Inclusive leadership impacts innovation performance through three primary mechanisms: belonging and psychological safety, idea sharing, and trust (Yikilmaz, 2023). Inclusive leaders are open, accessible, and available, influencing not only individual but also group and inter-group innovation performance, in a compounding manner over time (Javed, Naqvi, Khan, Arjoon & Tayyeb, 2017; Yikilmaz, 2023). When an employee feels understood and valued, they are more inspired to innovate, and the collaboration and knowledge sharing that ensues thereafter enables sustainable competitiveness (Lei, Saeheng & Le, 2023).

Inclusive leaders promote employee voice, psychological contracts, psychological empowerment, and psychological capital, which in turn lead to increased innovation and creative work behaviours (Yikilmaz, 2023). Through timely feedback and shared power dynamics, these employees are empowered to make decisions autonomously at work (Javed *et al.*, 2019). An empowered employee is more inclined to engage in the trial-and-error approach of generating new ideas (Javed *et al.*, 2019). According to Yikilmaz (2023), psychological safety has a more considerable influence on innovative work behaviours than creative self-efficacy. However, this effect is diminished in the face of decreased challenge-related stress (Yikilmaz, 2023), implying that a degree of challenge is necessary for optimal change and innovation.

Inclusive leadership stands out as a leadership style capable of transcending single-loop learning, delving into the root causes of errors, expediting recovery, and preventing recurrence (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Innovation is enhanced through: a growth mindset (learning through experiences, experiments, and failures), knowledge, understanding, agility, collaboration, and empowerment (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024).

1.5.4. Inclusive organisational brand culture and human resource practises for innovation

Organisational culture is widely considered a collection of norms, beliefs and values that govern the way an employee feels, thinks, and acts or behaves (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016; AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024). Through leadership, internal brand building results in the transmission of the brand's promise and its responsibilities into reality through the thinking, feeling, acting, and behaving of employees (Milić *et al.*, 2014; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021). An organisations' culture is thus a manifestation of internal brand building through leadership, resulting in an organisational brand culture; this study therefore explores organisational brand culture through the lens of organisational culture and will use the terms interchangeably.

An inclusive organisational brand culture values diversity and inclusion, fostering an environment that supports creativity and innovation. Human resource practices and strategies play a vital role in shaping such cultures, particularly through brand-centred recruitment, training, and socialisation (Yikilmaz, 2023). Brand-centred training aligns job functions with the brand's story and values to effectively deliver on its promise (Düger, 2019; Rehman *et al.*, 2019), while socialisation communicates and embeds these values among employees (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, internal feedback systems promote open communication and reward behaviours aligned with brand values (Düger, 2019).

Together, these brand-centred practices create a unified foundation for employee behaviour, shaping collective norms and expectations for both internal and external brand-building success. With clearly defined roles and enhanced

cooperation, the organisation operates as an interconnected system in which employees internalise the brand's values and beliefs to fulfil its promise (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). As a result, adaptive organisational brand cultures extend their internal alignment outward seeing customers as valuable sources of insight, actively incorporating client feedback into continuous service-centric improvement (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021).

Hogan and Coote (2014), empirically examined the norms, values and artefacts that promote innovative work behaviour. Their research found value dimensions supportive of innovation such as, 'success, openness and flexibility, internal communication, competence and professionalism, inter-functional cooperation, responsibility of employees, appreciation of employees, and risk-taking' (Hogan & Coote, 2014:1611). For successful innovation, clear and consistent narratives of innovation are important to signal to employees what is expected of them, to coordinate action, share information and inspire innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Fang, Dai and Zhang (2021) assert that inclusive organisational brand leaders are the primary source of motivation for boundary-spanning initiatives leading to business model innovation.

An inclusive culture, according to Praveenadevi and Girimurugan (2019), is one that is fair to all and transparent in action, that promotes a culture of learning, that considers diverse views when strategising and focuses on equality and diversity. The benefits of inclusion include the greater probability of innovating through richer ideas and more diverse skills, as well as more loyal employees and better served customers (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019).

Cultural diversity in the workplace refers to the categorisation of individuals based on perceived commonalities (Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez, 2018). When organisations exclude certain groups, it often reflects an expectation that all individuals should conform to dominant norms and values. In contrast, inclusive organisational brand cultures embrace diverse value systems, respect cultural differences, and view diversity as a strength (Shore *et al.*, 2018; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). This gives employees the sense that they influence decision-making, and

discrimination is actively addressed (Ferdman and Deane, 2014; Shore *et al.*, 2018; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Randel, 2023).

Qi, Liu, Wei and Hu (2019) found that when organisational brand leaders were inclusive of new concepts and ideas, employees felt more valued, creating a reinforcing causal relationship with innovative behaviour. Inclusion satisfies two basic human needs: establishing belonging and uniqueness (Chung, Ehrhart, Shore, Randel, Dean & Kedharnath, 2020). Randel (2023) further notes that achieving a sense of belonging reduces uncertainty, enables greater agility in times of change, and reduces bias through the sharing of a common identity, while, on the reverse side, valuing uniqueness paves the way for self-enhancement and, consequently, a positive self-esteem.

1.5.5. Stakeholder-centric innovation

The theme of self-inclusion at the individual level and the inclusion of others at the collective cultural level, aligns with the research of Dr. Clare Graves, a psychology professor whose work is rooted in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (James, 2016; Wood, 2020; Vladić *et al.*, 2021). Based on human needs, individuals assign value to certain things, placing themselves at specific value levels. Graves identified eight sets of values, the associated beliefs, and corresponding behaviours (Graves, 1965a, 1965b; Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003). Graves' work later evolved into Spiral Dynamics, advanced by Dr. Don Beck and Chris Cowan, describing the evolution of consciousness at both individual and collective cultural levels (Cowan & Todorovic, 2000; Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003).

Each value level represents a human system, meme, or way of thinking, with cognitive complexity increasing as one moves up the spiral (Butters, 2015). This increased complexity enables the resolution of more complex problems (Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003), whereby stakeholder-centric innovation potentially becomes an emergent rather than episodic process. Value levels are geared toward responding optimally to environmental challenges, adapting to change in the organisational context, involving shifts in the organisation's purpose, vision,

mission, policies, decision-making processes, reporting, and strategies (Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003). At the individual level, employees need to develop new skills and neurological strategies to transition to a new value level.

There are eight recognised value levels, as shown in Table 1 below (Beck, 2014; Graves, 2018), with the first six constituting the first tier of human consciousness (Beck, 2012; Wood, 2020). These levels emerged from Graves' foundational research, which combined theoretical development with over 30 years of empirical observation of human behaviour (Butters, 2015). The seventh value level is where behaviours naturally supportive of stakeholder-centric innovation emerge. This includes brand authenticity and the inclusion of all stakeholders and healthy subordinate systems (Wood, 2020; Vladić *et al.*, 2021). Human beings transition from first-tier existence to second tier consciousness when moving into the seventh value level (Wood, 2020).

Table 1: Exploring the eight known value levels (Beck, 2014)

THE LIVING STRATA IN OUR PSYCHO-CULTURAL ARCHEOLOGY				
Stage	Colour Code	Popular Name	Thinking	Cultural manifestations and personal displays
8	Turquoise	Whole-View	Holistic	Collective individualism, cosmic spirituality, earth changes
7	Yellow	Flex-Flow	Ecological	Natural systems, self-principle, multiple realities, knowledge
6	Green	Human-Bond	Consensus	Egalitarian, feelings, authentic, sharing, caring, community
5	Orange	Strive-Drive	Strategic	Materialistic, consumerism, success, image, status, growth
4	Blue	Truth-Force	Authority	Meaning, discipline, traditions, morality, rules, lives for later
3	Red	Power-Gods	Egocentric	Gratification, glitz, conquest, action, impulsive, lives for now
2	Purple	Kin-Spirits	Animistic	Rites, rituals, taboos, superstitions, tribes, folk ways and lore
1	Beige	Survival-Sense	Instinctive	Food, water, procreation, warmth, protection, staying alive

To progress through each value level, certain themes must be resolved. The transition requires a fundamental shift in an individual's or a brand's thinking, feeling and acting, making it a complex and often messy process as the old must give way to the new (Wood, 2020). At value level four the theme to transcend is judgement and guilt progressing to empathy and compassion at value level five (James, 2016; Wood, 2020). Value level six requires resolving self-inclusion, while value level seven's emergence of values, especially the inclusion of others, follows the release of fear (James, 2016; Wood, 2020).

Value level four is considered the domain of bureaucratic brands, value level five represents capitalist brands, value level six signifies altruistic brands, and value level seven embodies brands that are inclusive and innovative (James, 2016). Companies operating at a collective value level of five are competitive and success-focused, often prioritising results over means and profits over

stakeholders, with information shared as needed (Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003). In contrast, value level seven companies are characterised by flexibility, undomineering leadership, emphasis on learning and self-development, and a focus on environmental sustainability, with information readily accessible to all (Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003).

Beck (2014) describes inclusive organisational brand cultures operating at value level seven as encompassing empowered, responsible individuals who collaborate towards an inspiring vision supporting a compelling purpose. They do so in a fluid, adaptive manner while embracing healthy conflict. These cultures maintain a long-term focus on the well-being of all components within the open system. This approach aligns with the principles of conscious or stakeholder capitalism, as advocated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Iizuka & Hane, 2021). Within this framework, purpose, planet, profit, and people are equally valued. The cultural inclusion observed at value level seven is essential for optimising stakeholder-centric innovation through diversity and inclusion (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). In such an environment, ideas are not only encouraged but also implemented (Vladić *et al.*, 2021).

Laloux (2014), in *Reinventing Organizations*, outlines five organisational types: red, amber, orange, green, and the emerging teal, drawing on the work of Gebser, Graves, Beck, Cowan and Wilber (Figure 4). Red organisations (value level 3) are likened to wolf packs, focused on command and division of labour. Amber (level 4) resembles armies with formal roles and rigid processes. Orange (level 5) operates like machines, driven by innovation, accountability, and meritocracy. Green (level 6) resembles families, emphasising shared values, inclusivity, and employee empowerment with a strong focus on stakeholders.

Teal organisations, though not given a metaphor, are described as purpose-driven, collaborative, self-organising, and aligned with nature's adaptive and evolutionary principles. Based on a study of over 50 organisations with at least 100 employees and five years of operation, Laloux (2014) notes that teal

organisations distribute authority, promote employee wholeness, and integrate personal and professional identities to cultivate authenticity and well-being.

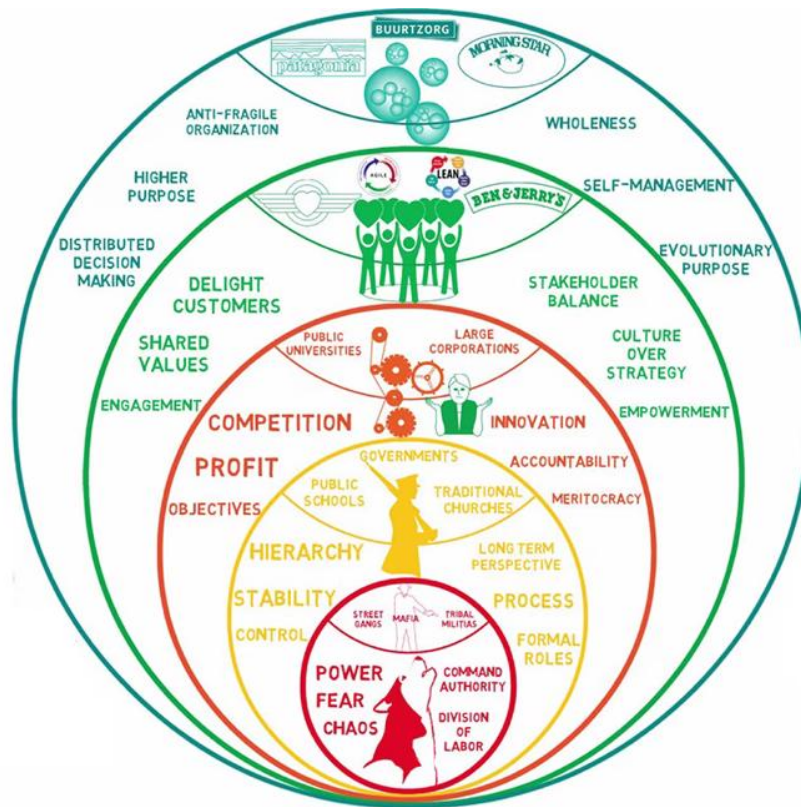


Figure 4: Levels of organisational consciousness (Laloux, 2014)

Laloux asserts that an organisation's development is limited by its leadership's developmental stage, emphasising that leaders shape the organisation's structures, practices, and culture based on their understanding. Similarly, an organisation's structure, practices, and culture can elevate a leader to operate at a higher developmental stage, propelling leadership forward (Laloux, 2014).

Wood (2020) suggests that developing self-healing in leaders is a fundamental step in moving toward teal organisations, creating the kind of environments in which stakeholder-centric innovation can thrive. Wood (2020) outlines four stages of this process, with the first stage involving the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and being mindful and self-aware. The second stage is consciously clearing any unconscious obstacles, while the third stage is personal growth and becoming a fully accountable individual. The final stage involves

showing up authentically and utilising one's unique abilities in a meaningful way. This transformation represents a shift from a materialistic worldview to one where self-awareness and collective self-mastery take centre stage. David and Congleton (2022) describe a similar process to achieve emotional agility for effective organisational brand leadership, which includes becoming conscious of one's patterns and accepting them, labelling thoughts and emotions to create distance between them and the observer, and acting on one's values.

In conclusion, the evolution of brand building highlights the importance of internal brand building and brand citizenship behaviour. These outcomes are supported by leadership styles such as transformational, inclusive, and authentic, which encourage innovation, creativity, and organisational change.

The literature emphasises the importance of psychological empowerment, psychological safety, and inclusive cultures that support employee engagement in the consistent delivery of the brand promise.

Inclusive leadership was highlighted as the style best suited for enabling employees to contribute their unique skills and ideas, and considered extra role behaviours as critical to stakeholder-centric innovation. Inclusive leaders adopt leadership practises grounded in Emotional Intelligence.

By adopting inclusive leadership alongside effective human resource practices, leaders can help organisations evolve up the values spiral toward value level seven or develop into teal organisations that build strong, authentic brands creating value for all stakeholders.

The chapters in the study will be laid out as per the following:

Chapter 2 explores more deeply the interconnected nature of leadership styles, organisational culture, human resource practices, and their impact on creativity, innovative work behaviour, internal brand building, and ultimately, organisational success. The literature is categorised under four headings; organisational brand leadership, internal brand building, inclusive leadership and leading for change.

Chapter 3 provides further detail regarding the research methodology to be utilised in addressing the research objectives noted and aims to answer the research questions. The study will employ a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore the subjective experiences and meanings associated with inclusive organisational brand leaders' journeys, drawing on in-depth interviews with 23 finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award in Southern Africa as issued by Business Engage NPC.

Chapter 4 presents the participant demographic data, followed by an initial discussion of the data analysis results. The researcher includes a thematic analysis, which is then compared against the existing literature and the research questions.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into the significance of findings in relation to the research problems and their societal implications. It considers the limitations and weaknesses of the study and suggest recommendations for policy and practises that may arise from the study. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the key contributions of the study and offers suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter systematically develops the conceptual foundations for examining inclusive organisational brand leadership as a leadership configuration optimal for innovation and change.

It opens with an overview of contemporary leadership conceptualisations, positioning leadership on a transformational-transactional spectrum and highlighting the growing emphasis on relational, developmental, and process-oriented perspectives. This initial section problematises the descriptive nature of much of the existing literature and foregrounds the need to interrogate mediating mechanisms, particularly trust, psychological safety, empowerment, and Emotional Intelligence, and the organisational support structures that sustain them.

The chapter then transitions to organisational brand leadership to reframe branding from a predominantly marketing construct to an organisation-wide leadership phenomenon. A central tension is explored between external brand strategy and internal brand building, with the latter positioned as more critical for sustainable brand enactment. Leadership is examined as the primary conduit through which brand purpose is translated into employee attitudes, behaviours and ultimately, brand citizenship. This discussion highlights the limitations of compliance-driven (transactional) models and foregrounds transformational and relational styles as more conducive to extra-role behaviour and innovation.

Subsequently, the chapter contrasts servant, entrepreneurial, ethical, responsible, and transformational leadership styles in relation to creativity, innovation, and change. Rather than accepting their efficacy at face value, the analysis interrogates their boundary conditions, fragilities and contextual contingencies, particularly their reliance on psychological safety, empowerment, trust, and follower perceptions as mediating variables.

The discussion then deepens into leading for creativity and innovation, distinguishing creativity from innovation and examining the socio-psychological processes, such as empowerment and safety, through which leadership influences innovative work behaviour. This provides a theoretical bridge between leadership style and brand-oriented outcomes.

The chapter subsequently deepens the exploration of internal brand building as a socio-organisational mechanism shaped by leadership, human resource practices, culture, and governance. It critically evaluates brand ambassadors, recruitment, training, and performance systems, highlighting tensions between alignment and diversity, coherence and dissent, and compliance and innovation. This section underscores the systemic conditions necessary for sustaining brand-oriented innovation.

Finally, Chapter 2 shifts to a deep exploration of inclusive leadership, positioning it as a potentially integrative response to the limitations of prior leadership models. Inclusive leadership is examined across three interconnected dimensions: its relation to change, innovation, and other leadership styles; enabling a culture for change and innovation; and communication and Emotional Intelligence (EI) in support of change and innovation. Inclusive leadership supports belonging, psychological safety, trust, empowerment, and voice, thereby stimulating change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour and extra-role innovation. Not only was it found optimal for innovation and change, but it also serves an inclusive culture, provided it is supported by governance and human resource practices.

Overall, Chapter 2 moves deliberately from broad leadership theory, to organisational brand leadership, to internal brand building systems, and finally to inclusive leadership as the focal construct. It progressively narrows toward the central research problem – identifying the enabling factors and support mechanisms that enable inclusive organisational brand leadership to function optimally for innovation and change.

2.1. OVERVIEW OF CURRENT CONCEPTUALISATION OF ORGANISATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Leadership in contemporary organisations is increasingly understood as a relational and developmental process through which leaders shape the growth trajectories of followers, and direct their efforts (Vukadinović, 2022). Yet, this influence is under-theorised in terms of mediating mechanisms and support structures. Leadership is commonly positioned on a spectrum between transformational and transactional approaches (Figure 5) and enacted through distinct behavioural repertoires. However, existing work tends to describe rather than critically interrogate how these behaviours translate into inclusive organisational brand leadership that is genuinely conducive to innovation and change.

Transformational behaviours are associated with influence and motivation, whereas transactional behaviours emphasise reward and performance management (Marathe, Balasubramanian & Singhal, 2017). A range of styles such as authentic, entrepreneurial, servant, ethical, strategic, responsible, and inclusive leadership are positioned as especially relevant to creativity, change and innovation. However, the specific pathways through which these styles foster inclusive brand-oriented outcomes remain insufficiently specified. Accordingly, this study problematises the current descriptive emphasis and seeks to explore the enabling factors and support mechanisms through which inclusive organisational brand leadership may become optimally configured for innovation and change.

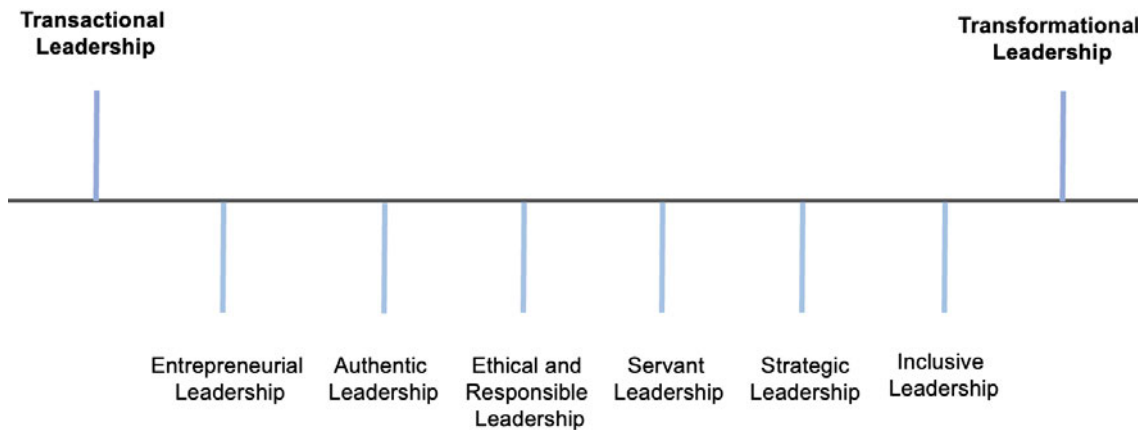


Figure 5: Organisational leadership spectrum for creativity, change and innovation (Constructed by researcher)

Existing literature recognises a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, where leadership style shapes follower attributes (Olinover, Gidron, Yarmolovsky, Lipschits & Geva, 2022), yet the dynamics of this reciprocity are often treated as linear and static, obscuring how inclusive leadership might differentially affect diverse follower groups over time. The literature on brand leadership prescribes that leaders should embody and authentically live organisational brand values to drive employee engagement, brand pride and purpose-driven strategies that benefit multiple stakeholders (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Enslin *et al.*, 2023), but it offers limited insight into how this authenticity is supported, monitored or contested within complex organisational systems.

Brand-centred recruitment, training and socialisation are presented as critical mechanisms for communicating and embedding brand values, reducing role ambiguity and conflict, and enhancing role behaviour (Lauer, 2018; Düger, 2019; Rehman *et al.*, 2019), although there is comparatively little empirical scrutiny of how these practices may reproduce exclusion, constrain voice, or privilege particular identity profiles in the name of brand consistency. An integrated internal and external brand identity where employees internalise brand values and beliefs to fulfil the brand promise is often promoted as an ideal state (Rehman *et al.*, 2019; Enslin *et al.*, 2023). However, it is not clear under what conditions such internalisation becomes enabling for inclusive innovation rather than being performative.

Within this broader landscape, inclusive leadership is positioned as a central enabling condition for cultures of innovation and change, particularly when leaders operate from behavioural integrity and are perceived as trustworthy (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Younas, Wang, Javed & Zaffar, 2020b). Inclusive leaders are credited with cultivating belonging and psychological safety and with motivating extra-role behaviours such as innovation and participation in change processes (Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Yikilmaz, 2023). Yet, these claims often rest on cross-sectional evidence and do not fully consider the boundary conditions that may limit such effects.

Descriptions of inclusive leadership emphasise follower focus such as attentive listening, respect, accessibility, openness to new ideas, timely appreciation of contributions, ongoing dialogue, prompt constructive feedback, and ownership of failures (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023), but they rarely differentiate between espoused inclusive behaviours and those actually experienced by employees in contexts of high performance pressure and brand protection.

The argument that inclusive leaders actively seek insights, normalise failure, promote learning and facilitate knowledge exchange (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023), suggests the presence of powerful mediating processes, yet these processes and the organisational support mechanisms that sustain them (for example HR systems, learning architectures or governance arrangements) are seldom made explicit. Some conceptual work clusters inclusive leadership around four key domains; support for employee uniqueness (support, empowerment, learning and development, diversity), fostering belonging (equity, relationships, shared decision-making), appreciation (recognition of contributions and effort), and inclusion in organisational change (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). This points to a potentially rich framework, but empirical studies have not systematically examined how these domains interact to shape inclusive organisational brand leadership oriented towards innovation.

Parallel to this, the literature draws attention to a set of leadership skills – particularly Emotional Intelligence, communication and strategic capability – as pivotal in navigating change and promoting employee openness to change (Men, Yue & Liu, 2020), but these skills are often treated as individual traits rather than as capabilities embedded in relational and organisational contexts. Strategic leaders are portrayed as articulating a clear vision, providing direction and inspiring commitment, thereby increasing the success of change initiatives (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). However, less is known about how such strategic communication aligns with, or undermines, inclusive brand narratives when trade-offs between inclusivity and short-term performance arise. Emotionally intelligent leaders are said to catalyse change through passion, enthusiasm, knowledge and skill, building trust and follower support (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Current accounts offer limited insight into the factors that mediate Emotional Intelligence and its relationship to inclusive leadership.

At the cultural level, inclusive cultures supported by inclusive leaders can enhance organisational effectiveness by incorporating diverse perspectives (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019). Adaptable cultures characterised by openness, adaptability and a commitment to change are also presented as being better suited for change (Odor, 2018; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Yet, much of this work presumes that inclusivity and adaptability naturally co-occur; tensions between stability, control and openness are underexplored, especially in strongly branded environments where messages must remain coherent across stakeholders. Decentralised decision-making and knowledge sharing are identified as important facilitators of change implementation (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Odor, 2018; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). However, the specific organisational design elements, governance structures and support mechanisms that enable genuinely inclusive participation in decision-making processes are not well articulated.

Key insights gained from organisational leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. Transformational leadership inspires extra-role innovation and transactional leadership is limited to in-role compliance.
2. Reciprocal influence builds resilience, but risks role ambiguity without brand socialisation.
3. Inclusive leadership traits drive belonging and safety key for innovation, but overlook mediators like EI for sustainability.
4. A decentralised and open culture enhances adaptability and is suited for change, but hindered by hierarchical styles that stifle psychological safety.

Conceptual models such as the one represented in Figure 6, highlight the interconnected nature of organisational leadership and culture, their impact on inclusive innovation, and the broader movement towards inclusive brands, yet this model remains high-level and under-specified with regard to the concrete mediating factors and support systems that link inclusive leadership with brand outcomes in practice.

Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leaders create **inclusive organisational brand cultures** from which **inclusive innovation** can emerge. Inclusive leaders are **self-inclusive**. **Emotional intelligence** accelerates leadership self-inclusion.

Inclusive innovation

Inclusive innovation is required to solve the **complexity of problems** in existence and create value for all stakeholders. Inclusive innovation, as do the **UN SDGs**, aims to promote the **well-being of all stakeholders**, enabling all to thrive sustainably.

Inclusive organisational brand culture

Diversity is essential to innovation. **Inclusion** is required to realise the value of diversity, through **inclusive organisational brand cultures**. Inclusive organisational brand cultures have high levels of **belonging and uniqueness**. The output of these **value level 7** organisational cultures is inclusive innovation.

Brand evolution

Brands are **co-created** with stakeholders and are positioning themselves as expressions of the **acceptance of self and others**. There is a movement towards **conscious or inclusive brands**, brands that serve all stakeholders.

Figure 6: Themes emerging from the preliminary literature review (Constructed by researcher)

Against this backdrop, this study, titled *Enabling Factors and Support Mechanisms in the Emergence of Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Optimal for Innovation and Change*, takes these themes – organisational brand leadership, internal brand building, inclusive leadership, and leading for change – as interrelated domains that require critical, integrative examination.

2.2. ORGANISATIONAL BRAND LEADERSHIP

According to Gaski (2020), a brand is defined as a *name, term, design, or symbol* that identifies a seller's offering. Yet in practice and research, the meaning of a brand often drifts to be of the product itself, set of product, brand image, brand equity, consumer perceptions, or brand value. This conceptual drift creates confusion, rendering much empirical brand literature ambiguous and brand leadership theoretically incoherent (Gaski, 2020).

Organisational brand leadership has emerged as a central construct in understanding organisational performance within increasingly volatile and competitive environments. While early branding scholarship positioned brand

leadership primarily within the domain of marketing, contemporary literature increasingly conceptualises it as an organisation-wide leadership phenomenon that integrates employee behaviour (Enslin et al., 2023). Organisational leadership centred on the brand operationalises internal branding and drives employee commitment through role modelling (Prashar & Maity, 2024). This shift reflects growing recognition that brand value is co-created internally through leadership-mediated behaviours that empower and align employees with organisational values. This ensures the consistent delivery of the brand promise (Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021; Prashar & Maity, 2024) rather than it merely being communicated externally.

Organisational brand leadership extends beyond symbolic brand expression to encompass the orchestration of cohesive behaviours across the organisational ecosystem that collectively uphold a distinctive and purpose-driven brand identity (Enslin et al., 2023). Leaders therefore function not only as strategic decision-makers but as behavioural role models who shape employees' brand-related attitudes, discretionary behaviours, and sense-making processes (Shaari et al., 2015; Olinover et al., 2022, Prashar & Maity, 2024). The literature consistently positions leadership as a decisive lever in aligning organisational values with lived employee experience, a prerequisite for the consistent delivery of the brand promise.

While brand strategy offers competitive advantage, the literature reveals a flaw in externally focused approaches. External visibility alone fails to sustain brand equity. Instead, internal brand building mediated by leadership, dominates by ensuring consistent brand value experiences and aligning employee behaviour (Düger, 2019) with the brand promise (Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021). Thus, organisational brand leadership functions as a relational, behavioural process embedded in leadership practice, not merely communications.

2.2.1. External brand strategy versus internal brand building

A central tension within the brand leadership literature lies in the contrast between external brand strategy and internal brand building. Enslin et al. (2023)

conceptualise brand purpose as the organisation's highest-order organising principle, shaping decisions, behaviours, and stakeholder relationships. Yet, Minbashrazgah et al. (2021) caution that brand purpose remains performative unless translated into employee behaviour through leadership. External brand strategy alone is insufficient for creating and sustaining a brand (Düger, 2019).

Lauer (2018) suggests that brands may increasingly rival governments in addressing societal challenges, this amplifies rather than diminishes the importance of understanding how brands are enacted internally. The literature converges on the argument that brand orientation, where organisational strategy is anchored in brand purpose, requires leaders to actively mediate the translation of brand commitments into daily practice (Milić et al., 2014; Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). In this framing, internal brand engagement becomes the mechanism through which abstract brand promises are operationalised through employees who build brand equity through their interactions with stakeholders (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Brand-oriented organisations hold the brand purpose at the core of their strategy while they influence the operating model and brand positioning through decisions and actions (Enslin *et al.*, 2023).

Organisational brand leadership involves meeting stakeholder needs through strategy and internal brand building. Without the leaders who create and execute brand purpose aligned strategy, the benefits of a brand would never be realised (Milić *et al.*, 2014). Shaari *et al.* (2015) note that top management and supervisors play influential roles in internal and external brand development, as they communicate the values of the brand verbally and non-verbally, thereby influencing employee commitment and behaviour that supports the brand (Milić *et al.*, 2014; Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). If a brand orientated leadership is to create, develop, and protect a brand identity (Milić *et al.*, 2014), internal brand cultivation is how an organisation realises the creation, development, and protection of its brand internally and externally.

Brand identity must be internalised by employees before it can successfully translate into brand image externally (Prashar & Maity, 2024). Internal brand

alignment precedes external brand strength and positively predicts employee commitment (Prashar & Maity, 2024). Düger (2019) describes internal brand building as bringing a life force or spirit to a brand and providing superiority that is unique and challenging to emulate. Prashar and Maity (2024), reframe branding as not merely marketing communication, but as a system of internal organisational alignment – a collection of brand-centred organisational practices – that allow employees to deliver the brand promise willingly and consistently. Brand-centred organisational practices integrate aspects of leadership, human resources, communication, organisational culture, training and development, and reward and recognition (Prashar & Maity, 2024).

The choice of leadership style emerges as a critical differentiator in the internal brand building process (Prashar & Maity, 2024). Transactional leadership is positioned as effective for reinforcing brand compliance through reward and sanction mechanisms (Morhart *et al.*, 2009; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021). However, its efficacy is largely confined to in-role performance. In contrast, transformational leadership is repeatedly identified as more effective in eliciting extra-role performance and brand citizenship behaviour by appealing to employees' intrinsic values and sense of identification with the brand (Morhart *et al.*, 2009; Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Vukadinović, 2022).

This distinction exposes a limitation in performance-driven brand governance models. While transactional leadership may ensure consistency, it appears insufficient for fostering the discretionary, value-aligned behaviours required for innovation and adaptive change. As such, the literature increasingly privileges transformational leadership as the more robust approach for internal brand building, particularly in contexts requiring change, innovation, and employee-driven differentiation.

Organisational brand leadership, therefore, is a critical component of organisational success, with a focus on internal brand building being more powerful than external brand development in the current competitive business climate (Düger, 2019; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021). Branding is no longer solely

the domain of marketing, but it now includes human resources and organisational leadership (Lauer, 2018). While transactional and transformational leadership styles have their respective roles in transferring brand commitments and eliciting brand citizenship behaviour (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021; Vukadinović, 2022), transformational leadership is more suited to innovation and change. Organisational brand leadership skills are increasingly sought after to meet stakeholder needs, and top management and supervisors play a significant role in influencing employees' behaviours and attitudes to align with the brand, through internal brand building (Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021).

Key insights gained from the external brand strategy versus internal brand building literature pertinent to the study:

1. External branding communicates the brand promise externally, but is insufficient in isolation for sustainably communicating the brand promise.
2. Internal brand building boosts loyalty and fulfils the brand promise, but needs human resources and leadership.
3. Brand purpose informs the ecosystem, but needs leadership.
4. Transformational leadership is more suited to innovation and change, but transactional leadership plays a role in brand compliance.

2.2.2. The relationship between internal brand building and leadership

Internal brand building is consistently defined as the process by which brand commitments are enacted through employee attitudes and behaviours, ensuring the consistent delivery of the brand promise (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Düger, 2019; Minbashrazgah *et al.*, 2021; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Internal brand building encompasses employees' attitudes and behaviours in upholding the brand promise, significantly impacting the success of a brand, and fortifying it from within (Düger, 2019).

Rather than a unidirectional transmission of messages, it is framed as an integrative process that aligns marketing, human resources, and leadership practices, under the guidance of leadership to ensure continuity, employee

engagement, and ultimately to enhance organisational and brand performance (Düger, 2019).

Leaders play a pivotal role in determining the success of internal brand building, not only through strategic intent but through the extent to which employees internalise brand values and enact them behaviourally (Milić *et al.*, 2014; Düger, 2019; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Internal brand building necessitates the involvement of top management, including human resources and marketing (Düger, 2019; Enslin *et al.*, 2023), while departmental leaders act as facilitators encouraging behaviours that align with the brand. The literature underscores that every leadership act – explicit or implicit – contributes to brand meaning-making. Each act either reinforces or undermines alignment between espoused values and lived experience (Milić *et al.*, 2014; Düger, 2019).

Rehman *et al.* (2019) emphasise internal brand building as a critical factor for brand performance success in delivering on brand promises and establishing authentic stakeholder relationships (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). Leadership operates at the micro level through role modelling exemplary actions and macro level through commitment signals to align employees with the brand promise (Prashar & Maity, 2024).

Leaders function as brand leaders and are pivotal in shaping employee brand-building behaviours (Morhart *et al.*, 2009; Prashar & Maity, 2024). They drive employee behaviour towards *living* the brand (Figure 7), engendering commitment that enhances brand equity, including customer loyalty (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Brand is the central organising construct of marketing; thus, anyone in a leadership role engaging with it acts as a “brand leader”, often without conceptual clarity about what that entails (Gaski, 2020).

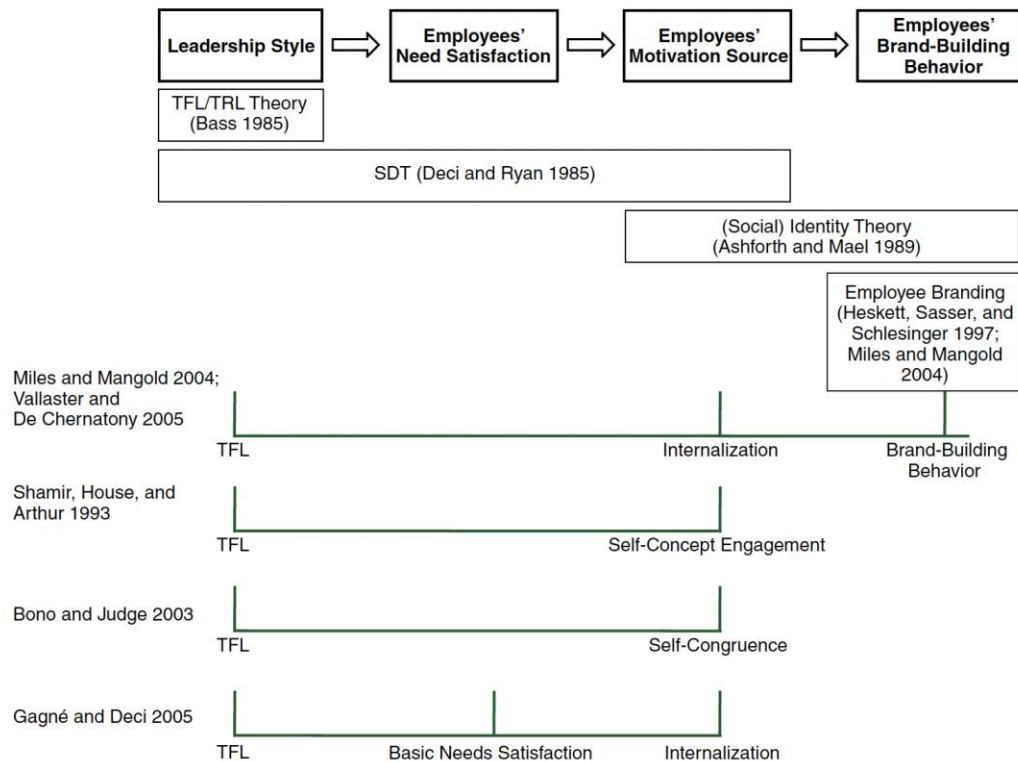


Figure 7: Overview of relevant theories and their connection (Morhart et al., 2009)

Leaders play a vital role in promoting brand-supportive actions; their behaviours are a key driver in internal brand management. These behaviours directly motivate employees to act as brand champions and to realise the brand promise (Morhart et al., 2009). Internal branding is a system, and leadership behaviour is a core operationalisation of that system (Prashar & Maity, 2024). Every leader who shapes behaviour, culture, or communication acts as a brand leader, whether intentionally or not. Brand leadership is embedded in decision-making, communication style, reward choices, cultural reinforcement, and daily behaviour (Prashar & Maity, 2024). The idea that all leaders are brand leaders is largely implicitly stated in the literature. Moreover, all leaders are instrumental in the operationalisation of an internal branding system. Organisational leaders need to act on behalf of the organisational brand through tailored styles (Morhart et al., 2009) and are therefore organisational brand leaders (Prashar & Maity, 2024).

Key insights gained from the relationship between internal brand building and leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. Leadership aligns behaviour to the brand promise, but needs human resources and marketing integration.
2. Brand citizenship enables extra-role support, but is dependent on trust.
3. The leaders referenced in this study are organisational leaders, organisational leaders are organisational brand leaders.

Positioned as particularly influential in realising brand citizenship behaviour, transformational leadership is defined as the discretionary actions that extend beyond formal role requirements, to strengthen the brand (Shaari et al., 2015; Rehman et al., 2019). Brand citizenship behaviour is crucial for successfully delivering on the products and services of the brand through the consistent synchronisation of employee behaviour with the organisational brand (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). Trust in leadership emerges as a mediating factor, with employees who perceive leaders as credible and value-aligned demonstrating higher commitment and willingness to act as brand ambassadors (Shaari *et al.*, 2015).

Organisational brand leadership operates at both macro level that involves the Board and its Chief Executive Officer, and micro level that encompasses executives. Employees often model their own behaviours on those demonstrated by leaders who instil pride, commitment, and a sense of purpose through consistent guidance and mentorship (Shaari *et al.*, 2015).

Notably, recent leadership scholarship extends this discussion by linking internal brand building to inclusive and team-oriented leadership approaches. These approaches support innovation by encouraging risk-taking, continuous learning, the achievement of excellence, and embracing opportunities (Wong et al., 2019; Eddy et al., 2022). Such leadership create environments that are conducive to innovation and cooperative conflict management for the purposes of enhanced solutions (Yarbrough, 2023). This signals a conceptual shift from leader-centric

control models toward relational leadership processes that enable adaptive brand enactment.

This study seeks to investigate the optimal leadership style for translating a brand's commitments into reality. In the following sections, organisational brand leadership will be viewed through the broader lens of leadership; readers are encouraged to interpret these references as catalysts for fostering brand citizenship behaviour. This aligns with the conclusions of Enslin *et al.* (2023), indicating that branding extends beyond traditional marketing strategies to involve visual, verbal, and auditory cues that encompass the broader organisational ecosystem. This ecosystem thrives on cohesive behaviours that uphold a distinctive and inspiring brand purpose – behaviours that are largely influenced by transformational leaders.

2.2.3. Transactional and transformational leadership in contrast

The literature consistently differentiates between transactional and transformational leadership as distinct, yet complementary modes of influence. Each of these encompasses various leadership types (Figure 5). Transactional leadership prioritises performance management through contingent rewards and corrective intervention, while transformational leadership emphasises inspiration, vision, and intrinsic motivation (Marathe et al., 2017).

Leadership types relevant to change, creativity and innovation include entrepreneurial, authentic, ethical, responsible, servant, strategic and inclusive leadership (Figure 5). To answer the research question as to what inclusive organisational brand leadership is, it is valuable to explore what it is, and what it is not, in relation to these types.

1. An *entrepreneurial leader* is one who encourages creativity and innovation through risk-taking and proactive behaviour.
2. A *servant leader* focuses on serving others, cultivating a sense of community and inclusion.

3. *Ethical leadership* is characterised by fairness, transparency, and moral integrity, contributing to psychological safety and trust.
4. A *responsible leader* emphasises ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and long-term value creation.
5. *Strategic leaders* communicate a clear vision, provide direction towards it, and inspire its attainment, boosting the adoption of change, organisational, and staff performance, as well as overall employee morale (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

Vukadinović (2022) explains that leadership can be understood in different ways, either as a set of personality traits such as confidence, decisiveness and sociability, or as behaviours and processes that change depending on the context, such as in business, the arts, or politics. Leaders play a pivotal role in steering organisational performance (Olinover *et al.*, 2022).

Leadership influence through behaviours that are typically categorised as transformational or transactional, and can manifest through cooperation, conflict resolution, or trade-offs (Marathe *et al.*, 2017). Transformational leaders focus on influence and motivation, demonstrating charisma, inspiration, and creativity, while emphasising individual ownership of work. In contrast, transactional leaders prioritise performance management, providing rewards conditionally and monitoring performance to intervene when standards are not met.

Empirical evidence suggests that while both styles influence organisational outcomes, transformational leadership demonstrates greater effectiveness across organisational contexts, particularly in relation to trust, engagement, and innovation (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). Transformational leaders are described as 'visionaries, who generate high levels of trust, serve as role models, show consideration for others, delegate responsibilities, empower followers, teach, communicate, listen, and influence followers' (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021:184).

Key insights gained from the transactional versus transformational leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. Transactional leadership rewards in-role performance; transformational leadership cultivates extra-role brand citizenship behaviours through value appeal.
2. Transactional leadership achieves brand compliance; transformational leadership is more suited to innovation, but needs charisma.

This aligns with the distinction between task-oriented and relationally oriented leadership, with the latter more strongly associated with collective commitment and adaptive performance (Olinover *et al.*, 2022). While task-oriented leaders excel in strategic planning, attention to detail, and mission execution skills, relationally oriented leaders demonstrate proficiency in systemic thinking, organisational loyalty, understanding the needs of others, and inspiring them towards a shared vision (Olinover *et al.*, 2022).

Marathe *et al.* (2017) argue that leadership can be understood as a process, a position, or an individual's traits, but its essence lies in the outcomes it produces. This includes setting direction, establishing alignment, and eliciting commitment. Leaders achieve these outcomes by influencing the behaviours and motivations of followers, often through activities that involve learning, creativity, and innovation.

Eddy *et al.* (2022), identify three approaches to defining leaders: a leader-focused approach that emphasises the leader's abilities, positions, and roles; an other-focused approach that highlights collaboration; and an institutionally focused approach that is driven by the organisational mission.

Critically, leadership theory has evolved from trait-based and hierarchical models toward process-oriented, participatory, and inclusive frameworks that promote innovation, with creativity as a key component (Wong *et al.*, 2019; Eddy *et al.*, 2022). This evolution reflects broader socio-cultural shifts towards collaborative, empowering, and relational leadership competencies that emphasise the process

of leading others towards shared objectives (Eddy *et al.*, 2022). These leaders prioritise human connection, promote safe environments, and inspire trust, which significantly reduce staff turnover rates, particularly among younger employees (Yarbrough, 2023).

Yarbrough (2023) underscores the importance of developing relational skills to enhance the ability of a leader to motivate and effectively collaborate with their teams. These relational skills enable teams to manage internal conflict more constructively. This approach is shown to improve both team performance and effectiveness (Wong *et al.*, 2019). In turn, leaders are increasingly valued for their empathy, Emotional Intelligence (EI), and trust-building capabilities, which allow them to connect with values-driven employees on a deeper level (Yarbrough, 2023). These leaders empower their teams to take risks, develop potential, and support innovation.

On the other side, some traits like insecurity, inflexibility, and authoritarianism can inhibit effective leadership (Vukadinović, 2022). To address this, proactive leadership development initiatives that incorporate coaching and mentoring, are recommended to cultivate relational competencies and promote more inclusive and empowering leadership styles (Yarbrough, 2023).

Wong *et al.* (2019) underscore the significance of servant leadership, defining it as having a focus on others, community, service, consensus-building, and the holistic development of individuals to better serve clients. Rabiul, Shamsudin, Yean and Patwary (2023), argue that servant leadership, more than any other style, produces the greatest attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, because these leaders listen and communicate with fairness. Their core objective is to cultivate high-quality relationships among team members and clients (Wong *et al.*, 2019). Successful servant leaders prioritise fostering positive relationships with their followers rather than imposing solutions. They encourage constructive engagement to resolve conflicts effectively, thereby enhancing client service, commitment and engagement (Wong *et al.*, 2019).

From an integrated leadership theory perspective, which blends multiple leadership approaches into a cohesive model, leaders drive organisational change by aligning followers' motivation (intrinsic drive), direction (clear goals and paths), and commitment (emotional buy-in) to achieve shared outcomes (Marathe *et al.*, 2017). This positions leaders as architects of enabling follower change. However, it overlooks enablers of change efficacy, creativity and innovation. Contemporary leadership is shifting from rigid traditional hierarchical styles toward other-centric, participatory styles that boost creativity and collaboration (Eddy *et al.*, 2022; Yarbrough, 2023). Creativity (a component of innovation) that has historically been sidelined, has emerged as a central skill for navigating complexity and change (Vukadinović, 2022).

2.2.4. Leading for creativity and innovation

Mehmood, Zhang, Akram and Tariq (2021), and Vukadinović (2022) view creativity as a 'useful and effective response to evolutionary change' (Vukadinović, 2022:65) that enables individuals to adapt and be flexible, thereby providing organisations with a competitive advantage and increased sustainability (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). Creativity is conceptualised as both a psychological and sociocultural phenomenon, as employees require empowerment and inspiration to create. Notably, the strongest connection to organisational innovation originates from leaders who display creative behaviours (Vukadinović, 2022).

Creativity and innovation are distinct but interconnected concepts; creativity involves generating original and valuable ideas, while innovation encompasses both the development and implementation of those ideas into practical outcomes (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021).

Vukadinović (2022) identifies nine aspects of the creative process:

1. *Originality* refers to the generation of a unique idea or a first-time creation;
2. *Openness* is the willingness to accept new ideas and overcome established habits;

3. *Sensitivity* is characterised by curiosity and an awareness of emerging problems;
4. *Flexibility* relates to the variety and diversity of ideas generated;
5. *Fluency of ideas* reflects the smooth and continuous flow of thoughts in a particular direction;
6. *Creative fantasy* involves the capacity to dream and imagine possibilities beyond present realities;
7. *Tolerance of uncertainty* refers to an individual's ability to endure ambiguity and remain effective despite it; those who can tolerate uncertainty for longer are more likely to produce effective solutions;
8. *Creative generalisation* requires combining different ideas into a single concept; while
9. *Creative differentiation* is about recognising differences and exploring alternative possibilities (Vukadinović, 2022).

Leadership styles influence creativity and internal brand building through factors such as psychological empowerment, autonomy, and social support, which enable employees to take initiative and generate innovative ideas (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). Follower-focused approaches like servant leadership, encourage engagement, collaboration, and idea-sharing, while goal-focused frameworks like transactional leadership, may limit creative behaviour due to their emphasis on performance and control (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). Transformational, entrepreneurial, ethical, and responsible leadership have all been linked to enhancing creativity, innovative work behaviour, and effective internal brand building, with psychological empowerment and psychological safety acting as key enablers of extra-role behaviour and innovation.

Psychological safety emerges as a critical mediating mechanism, enabling employees to engage in the creative process, identify problems, seek information about the problem, and generate ideas to solve it without fear of negative consequences (Javed *et al.*, 2017). Javed *et al.* (2017) and Mehmood *et al.* (2021)

describe psychological empowerment as an intrinsic motivator that consists of 'self-determination, competence, meaning, and impact' (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021:438), on which leadership plays a critical role.

Ethical and responsible leadership further reinforce these conditions by fostering trust, fairness, and moral legitimacy, thereby reducing perceived risk and encouraging innovative work behaviour (Younas, Wang, Javed, Rawwas, Abdullah & Zaffar, 2020a). Psychologically safe environments as being fostered by ethical leaders, empower employees to speak up, share differences, take risks, and engage in creativity and innovation (Younas *et al.*, 2020a).

Responsible leadership entails creating inclusive value for stakeholders, nurturing positive stakeholder relationships, and driving positive change while upholding the brand's purpose as a strategic intent (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). These leaders are accountable, genuine in their intentions, infuse moral values into the brand ecosystem, build stakeholder trust, foster socio-economic development, and embody a multi-faceted approach to leadership that transcends individual actions to impact organisational and contextual impact (Enslin *et al.*, 2023).

Responsible leadership, in particular, demands inclusive stakeholder value creation, relational nurturing, and driving positive change while upholding the brand's purpose as a strategic intent (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). However, when brand purpose is treated as a strategic goal, it can be criticized for appearing performative rather than genuinely ethical, particularly in contexts marked by power imbalances.

To address the complex challenges of our times, a different type of organisation is required (Laloux, 2014). 'Innovation is the key to organisational survival' (Hogan & Coote, 2014:169). Javed *et al.* (2017) and Younas *et al.* (2020b) emphasise the crucial role of innovation in enhancing products, services, and working methods, adapting to competition, and evolving customer needs (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Innovation emerges when new ideas are developed, promoted, and implemented (Javed *et al.*, 2017). AlSaied and Alkhoraif (2024) refer to ambidextrous

innovation as explorative and exploitative innovation, with the former referring to new products and services of value, and the latter referring to enhancing the value of existing products and services.

Leaders play a vital role in cultivating innovative work behaviour among employees (Javed et al., 2019). Organisational success depends on the interplay between leaders' characteristics, followers' perceptions, and the context in which influence occurs that would enable adaptive and effective performance (Olinover et al., 2022:72). Leaders influence innovation not only through vision but through relational quality, empowerment, and the cultivation of environments that tolerate uncertainty and failure (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

Innovative work or extra-role behaviour is influenced by the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers that would motivate employees to take the risks necessary to not only generate, but promote and implement new or creative ideas (Javed *et al.*, 2017; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). In times of change, leadership styles that incorporate elements of servant and entrepreneurial leadership demonstrate their potential to create and enable opportunities, drive transformation, and establish the foundations upon which individuals and organisations achieve results (Vukadinović, 2022).

While transformational leadership has long been associated with creativity, empirical findings remain inconsistent. In contrast, entrepreneurial leadership demonstrates a more consistent, positive relationship with employee creativity, mediated by psychological safety and psychological empowerment (Mehmood, Zhang, Akram & Tariq, 2021).

With respect to creativity specifically, entrepreneurial leadership exhibits a more consistent positive association with employee creativity than other styles, mediated by psychological safety and psychological empowerment (Mehmood, Zhang, Akram & Tariq, 2021). This relationship privileges transformational over transactional variants of entrepreneurial leadership; the distinction warrants attention, as it risks oversimplifying the contextual contingencies shaping creative

outputs. Transformational, follower-centric approaches like servant leadership encourage engagement, collaboration, and idea-sharing, whereas transactional, goal-focused approaches may limit creative behaviour due to their emphasis on performance and control (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). However, transactional elements might, in high-uncertainty contexts, spur creativity by imposing necessary structure.

Ethical and responsible leadership, which align with transformational paradigms, further reinforce conditions that are optimal for adaptability by fostering trust, fairness, and moral legitimacy, thereby reducing perceived risk and encouraging innovative work behaviour (Younas, Wang, Javed, Rawwas, Abdullah & Zaffar, 2020a).

To conclude, transformation leadership styles that encompass servant, entrepreneurial, ethical, and responsible variants, have been associatively linked to change facilitation, creativity enhancement, innovative work behaviour, and internal brand building, with psychological empowerment and safety acting as key mediators of extra-role behaviour and innovative outcomes.

Nonetheless, these connections demand a deeper exploration into their suitability for change, creativity, and innovation contexts, prior to juxtaposing them against inclusive leadership.

Key insights gained from the leadership style suitability for adaptability, creativity and innovation literature pertinent to the study:

1. Entrepreneurial leaders are innovation-driven, and opportunity-seeking, they consistently boost employee creativity, but that assumes a transformational variant and is context-dependent.
2. Servant leadership is follower-centric focused on service and support, it engenders collaboration, trust and engagement, but risks leader overload or passivity.

3. Ethical leaders operate with moral integrity and fairness, they build trust, and fairness, reducing risk perception, but there may potentially be moral ambiguity in application.
4. Responsible leaders focus on stakeholder inclusion and purpose; they drive positive change and stakeholder relationships, but may conflate ethics with strategy.

2.2.5. Servant, entrepreneurial, ethical and responsible leadership

More than any other style, servant leadership produces the greatest attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). It is described as fostering a team where ‘everyone is understood, served, and enhanced,’ developing a ‘community that respects and promotes each person’ (Wong *et al.*, 2019:242). These teams use cooperative conflict management skills to create a diverse, energetic team where members feel empowered to speak up, are heard and valued, and where decisions are made through consensus that benefits everyone (Wong *et al.*, 2019). Team members in such an environment generate a richer variety of ideas and solutions, and promote not only higher quality relationships within the team, but also with clients (Wong *et al.*, 2019).

Servant leadership is frequently positioned as particularly effective during periods of organisational change, owing to its emphasis on community-building, inclusivity, and collective problem-solving (Wong *et al.*, 2019; Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). By privileging relational dynamics over hierarchical control, servant leaders cultivate psychological safety and cooperative conflict resolution, which in turn, facilitate enhanced idea generation – crucial for creativity and innovation – and more robust stakeholder relationships. Notably, servant leaders exert a pronounced influence on teams rather than isolated individuals by prioritising collaborative objectives over competitive ones (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). This orientation establishes a robust foundation for cooperative conflict management and elevated team effectiveness (Wong *et al.*, 2019). However, its relative de-emphasis on individual agency risks undermining innovation, which fundamentally depends on leveraging diverse perspectives.

Vukadinović (2022) argues that the strongest relationship between leadership and organisational creativity and innovation comes from leaders who display creative behaviours, are authentic, entrepreneurial, and empowering. Creative behaviours, flexibility, diverse thinking, an ability to synthesise unconnected information, innovate, tolerate failure, and to focus on success are all indicators of a creative leader (Vukadinović, 2022). Vukadinović (2022) emphasises the importance of leaders being imaginative and sensitive to new problems and solutions, with 'automatism, ready-made solutions, and conformity [being] the opposite of creativity' (Vukadinović, 2022:72).

Mehmood *et al.* (2021) identify entrepreneurial leadership as a new theory emerging in response to the accelerating change of the 21st century, grounded in both leadership and entrepreneurial literature. While transformational leadership is often associated with generating creativity, Mehmood *et al.* (2021) report inconsistent findings. In contrast, entrepreneurial leadership shows a positive relationship with employee creativity, but this effect is mediated by the levels of empowerment and psychological safety that employees experience. Given that fear of failure and uncertainty can block creativity and innovation, Mehmood *et al.* (2021) recommend organisations adopt entrepreneurial leadership to navigate these challenges. Entrepreneurial leaders are described as 'risk-takers, creative, visionary and motivational' (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021:435), yet their impact on creativity depends on creating an environment of trust and empowerment. In summary, entrepreneurial leadership can inspire innovation, but only when psychological safety and empowerment are also prioritised.

Entrepreneurial leadership, while inherently oriented toward risk and opportunity, proves effective only when coupled with behaviours characteristic of ethical and responsible leaders, which reinforce trust and empowerment (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). This requirement, however, reveals the potential fragility of entrepreneurial leadership; in the absence of such moderating influences, it risks devolving into opportunism.

Ethical leadership, itself moderated by psychological safety, enables employees to internalise organisational values, tolerate error, and engage in creative exploration (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). When psychologically empowered and safe, employees are inspired to create and take risks (Javed *et al.*, 2017). Ethical leaders further contribute to this inspiration by building employee confidence and trust in their decision-making (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). Critically, however, this model of leadership presumes a supportive context that may not hold in high-stakes or resource-constrained environments. The limitation of such is that generalisability might not be plausible.

Ethical or moral entrepreneurial leaders, though not necessarily charismatic, are themselves creative and intentionally promote innovation, creating empowered, confident employees who are more secure in sharing new ideas (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). Entrepreneurial leaders inspire and direct employees to 'explore and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities' (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021:437). They do this by framing the opportunity, encouraging the exploration of the unknown, clearing the path to the new, removing uncertainty, and demonstrating ethical guidance and responsible decision-making, building commitment towards it, and specifying any limits (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021).

The underlying success of an entrepreneurial leader in realising the increased creativity and innovation of their employees rests not only on technical or managerial skills but also on their ethics or morality, which reinforces psychological safety and empowerment experienced by them (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). Javed *et al.* (2017) and Mehmood *et al.* (2021) describe psychological empowerment as an intrinsic motivator consisting of 'self-determination, competence, meaning, and impact' (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021:438), on which leadership plays a critical role. This ethical and supportive leadership stimulates the creation of new ideas and encourages employees to put in greater effort, take more risks. They can explore creative solutions, knowing their contributions will have a positive impact on the organisation (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021). While psychological empowerment is foundational, psychological safety is vital as it mediates risk-taking and reduces anxiety and fear (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021).

Psychological safety motivates employees to engage in the creative process, identify problems, seek information about the problem, and generate ideas to solve it (Javed *et al.*, 2017).

Mehmood *et al.* (2021) identify a causal relationship between creativity and the degree of interpersonal trust, safety, and support that is present in an environment. Creativity – essential for innovation – is enabled by risk-taking behaviours that challenge the status quo (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Psychological safety overcomes the fears associated with risk, such as the fear of failure, rejection, criticism, and the consequences of mistakes (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Leaders play a critical role in cultivating this environment by stimulating the communication of concerns, encouraging risk-taking behaviours, and demonstrating ethical and responsible leadership by role modelling integrity and the exploration of new business ideas and opportunities (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021).

Creativity flourishes in supportive environments that are created by leaders who are attentive, thoughtful, fair, good listeners, open, honest, respectful, genuine, responsive, communicative, promote dialogue and the rights of subordinates, engender trust, show care and compassion, encourage, and empower employees (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Yikilmaz (2023) suggests that psychological safety has a more significant impact on innovative work behaviours than creative self-efficacy. One must also consider ethical leadership – moderated by psychological safety – as an enabler of the creativity required for continuous improvement (Younas *et al.*, 2020a).

Ethical leaders influence employees to internalise the organisational vision and perform their tasks responsibly. They encourage openness to novel ideas, take a fair approach to decision-making, are more tolerant of errors, and reward successful contributions (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). The ethical standards of leaders in decision-making reduce employees' perceptions of risk through the credibility of a leader (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Their awareness of – and observed fairness in – reward and punishment further enhances employees' feelings of security (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Younas *et al.*, 2020a).

Ethical leaders serve as role models through their behaviours and actions, promoting their conduct through dialogue, reinforcement, and actively involving employees in decisions that affect them (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). In this environment of mutual trust, employees extend their imaginations and cultivate unique ideas for the purposes of improved procedures and to achieve departmental objectives (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Shaari *et al.* (2015) refer to the Social Learning Theory of Bandura. The latter suggests that individuals acquire new behaviours through the observation of others. They cultivate new skills and grow in confidence as they access more of their innate potential. Employees see challenges as opportunities and not threats, as they are not constrained by past failures or possible outcomes, making them more open to innovative solutions (Younas *et al.*, 2020a).

These psychologically empowered employees are more likely to be motivated and engaged (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). They speak up, share differences, take risks and engage in creativity and innovation (Younas *et al.*, 2020a). When psychological safety is absent, concerns about punishment, conflict, or failure can stifle the flow of new ideas. Ethical leadership is rooted in values, and guides organisational operations based on these principles (Younas *et al.*, 2020a).

Responsible leadership extends this logic by embedding leadership within a broader stakeholder and societal context, aligning brand purpose with long-term value creation (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). This aligns with the view that responsible leaders acknowledge the complexity of the world and strive to build a better future through ethical decision-making and stakeholder engagement (South Africa Today, 2024). Collectively, these leadership approaches converge around relational, inclusive, and purpose-driven mechanisms that enable internal brand building, creativity, and innovation, depending on unexamined contextual contingencies.

Olinover *et al.* (2022) introduce the concept of follower perception within relational leadership, highlighting a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, where the style of a leader influences the attributes of their followers.

The study emphasises that the effectiveness of a leader increases when followers perceive them as “worthy” and possessing the necessary leadership qualities, which introduces a subjective, potentially unstable mechanism (Olinover *et al.*, 2022).

Key insights gained from the servant, entrepreneurial, ethical and responsible leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. Servant leaders prioritise serving, creating community, inclusivity, consensus, psychological safety and cooperative conflict. They enhance idea generation, team effectiveness, and stakeholder relationships. The style is strong during change, but it de-emphasises individual agency, risking stifled innovation
2. Entrepreneurial leaders are risk-taking, visionary, motivational, and empowering. This boosts employee creativity when mediated by empowerment and psychological safety, and support the navigation of uncertainty, but it is fragile without ethical moderation. It risks opportunism and is inconsistent without safety.
3. Ethical leaders role model integrity, fairness, and openness. They build trust, tolerate errors, internalise values, and enable risk-taking, idea-sharing, psychological empowerment and safety, and mediate creativity through trust. However, it depends on a supportive context, and is limited in high-stakes environments.
4. Responsible leaders are focused on stakeholders and making ethical decisions; they are purpose-driven with relational and inclusive mechanisms. They align brand purpose with long-term value, support internal building, and stimulate creativity through engagement, but subjective follower perceptions are unstable and there are unexamined contingencies.

The summary below consists of the key insights gained from the organisational brand leadership literature review that are pertinent to this study:

1. Leadership operates on a spectrum; transformational styles inspire extra-role brand citizenship behaviours more suited to innovation and change and mediated by trust and charisma, while transactional styles are limited to in-role compliance.
2. Reciprocal leader-follower influence builds resilience, but risks role ambiguity without brand socialisation.
3. Decentralised and open cultures promote adaptability while hierarchical styles hinder psychological safety.
4. External branding communicates the brand promise externally, but is insufficient in isolation for sustainably communicating the brand promise.
5. Internal brand building boosts loyalty and fulfils the brand promise, but needs human resources and leadership to realise it.
6. Brand purpose informs the ecosystem, but it needs leadership.
7. Entrepreneurial, servant, ethical, responsible and inclusive leadership styles are most suited to change, creativity and innovation.
8. Entrepreneurial leadership is effective under conditions of uncertainty and can enhance creativity when mediated by psychological empowerment and safety. However, this reliance deems the style fragile and suggests it may be less suitable as a general contemporary leadership style.
9. Servant leadership enhances idea generation, team effectiveness and stakeholder relationships, and demonstrates strength during change. However, by de-emphasising individual agency, it risks stifling innovation, rendering the style unsuitable for general contemporary leadership.
10. Ethical leadership engenders risk-taking, idea-sharing, psychological empowerment and safety, thereby supporting creativity through trust. However, its fragility amidst moral ambiguity, limitations in high-stakes

environments and dependence on supportive contexts, render it unsuitable for general contemporary leadership.

11. Responsible leadership drives creativity through engagement, positive change, and stakeholder relationships, aligning brand purpose with long-term value. However, it risks conflating ethics with strategy and proves potentially unstable due to subjective follower perceptions and unexamined contingencies.

The literature indicates that transformational leadership is best suited for general contemporary leadership. Although elements of the reviewed styles excel in supporting change, creativity, and innovation, none function ideally as standalone approaches. Inclusive leadership, through belonging and safety, drives innovation more effectively than others, yet it has not been critically examined in relation to them. The following section explores the relationship between leadership and internal brand building. Inclusive leadership will then be juxtaposed against these styles, examining its constituent elements in the context of change, creativity, and innovation, before drawing conclusions on the style best suited for general contemporary leadership.

2.3. INTERNAL BRAND BUILDING

Cross-functional leaders build brand equity through their behaviours and engagements with stakeholders; this equity is framed as internal branding (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Internal brand building is frequently positioned in the literature as a stabilising force that enables organisations to remain engaged, coherent, and motivated under conditions of uncertainty and change (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). While this framing emphasises resilience and alignment, it tends to assume that shared identity and governance coherence, amid competing stakeholder demands and resource constraints, are inherently attainable. This assumption potentially undermines innovation.

Enslin *et al.* (2023) argue that internal brand building produces a clear and aligned organisational identity, supported by governance structures that channel

collective effort towards a common purpose. The literature consistently links internal brand building to the emergence of a strong internal and external brand, grounded in the collective actions of organisational members. These collective actions are theorised to translate into shared behaviours and, ultimately, into a culture that supports extra-role behaviour and organisational success.

However, this perspective underplays the tensions that can arise when organisational identities are contested, fragmented, or unevenly internalised across hierarchical and functional boundaries (Shaari *et al.*, 2015). It additionally, relies heavily on normative assumptions about employee willingness and capacity to engage beyond formal role expectations, particularly in contexts marked by power asymmetries, change fatigue, or competing stakeholder demands.

This section will explore internal brand building as a socio-organisational mechanism shaping culture and identity, with particular attention to leadership, human resource practices, and employee engagement. Rather than treating these elements as uniformly reinforcing, the discussion highlights both their enabling potential and their limitations in cultivating inclusive, purpose-driven cultures capable of sustaining innovation and change.

Key insights gained from the internal branding literature pertinent to the study:

1. Culture and engagement supports internal brand building, and builds motivated, aligned cultures that are suitable for uncertainty. However, it falters under resource limits and overlooks stakeholder conflicts.
2. Leadership supports the embodiment of values that engender pride and ambassadorship, but risks superficiality without authentic integration across hierarchies.
3. Recruitment and training reduce ambiguity. It also enhances citizenship, but human resource practises often prioritise compliance over extra-role innovation.

2.3.1. Brand ambassadors, leadership, and human resources

Contemporary leadership research advocates for a new breed of leaders capable of driving systemic and values-based change. Enslin *et al.* (2023) characterise such leaders as prioritising transparency, integrity, accountability, and purpose-driven action, positioning them as central agents in aligning organisational strategy with broader stakeholder interests. Purpose-driven leaders are catalysts for a stakeholder-aligned strategic position (Enslin *et al.*, 2023), yet this contrasts sharply with realities where leaders fail to authentically embody values (Shaari *et al.*, 2015). Employee pride are eroded, and it exposes a mediating gap in the behavioural integrity that is essential for leading change, creativity and innovation. Authenticity is positioned as a critical mediating factor between leadership intent and employee identification with the brand. However, authenticity itself is socially constructed and subject to employee interpretation. Therefore, leader role-modelling may not uniformly translate into shared meaning or commitment across diverse employee groups.

Additionally, this view risks overlooking the structural and contextual constraints that may limit the ability of leaders to enact purpose-driven strategies, particularly in performance-driven or resource-constrained environments. While Shaari *et al.* (2015) extol recognition and coaching for cultivating ambassadors, critics note human resource practices like brand-centred recruitment (Rehman *et al.*, 2019), frequently reinforce homogeneity over diversity, clashing with innovation demands in pluralistic contexts.

Rehman *et al.* (2019) frame brand citizenship as voluntary extra-role behaviour, but empirical contrasts reveal its fragility when rewards skew toward transactional in-role compliance, limiting support for discretionary innovation and change-ready mechanisms, diluting leadership efficacy. In contrast to the superficial focus of external branding, internal branding demands the systemic integration of leadership and human resource practices. Failure to do so creates gaps between brand promises and an ability of an employee to internalise and enact brand values. This has the potential of obscuring organisational accountability for

creating psychologically safe and inclusive environments in which such enactment is genuinely possible.

For employees to excel as brand ambassadors, they must not only comprehend brand terminology but actively support the brand (Düger, 2019). Rehman et al. (2019) emphasise the role of human resource practices as cultural mechanisms that shape employee behaviour through fair recruitment, brand-aligned training, and structured socialisation processes. Behavioural alignment with the brand promise hinges on training employees in line with brand values, internalising these values, and exhibiting behaviours characteristic of brand ambassadors (Düger, 2019). Although these practices are presented as foundational to behavioural alignment and market performance, they may also function as normative control mechanisms that constrain individuality and dissent in the pursuit of brand consistency, compromising innovation.

Innovative behaviours are considered the output of organisational citizenship – an extension of brand citizenship – when employees are willing to cooperate positively towards the organisation, help it grow and succeed (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). Brand citizenship behaviour is widely regarded as essential for delivering on the brand promise (Düger, 2019; Rehman et al., 2019). This literature distinguishes between in-role behaviour that is defined by formal rules and expectations, and extra-role behaviour, characterised by citizenship or voluntary and discretionary effort to exceed job requirements (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). While extra-role behaviour is framed as desirable and value-enhancing, its reliance on voluntarism does raise questions regarding workload intensification, emotional labour, and the implicit moralisation of employee commitment.

Rehman et al. (2019) further extend brand citizenship beyond the organisation to encompass relationships with all stakeholders, positioning employees as boundary-spanning agents of the brand. This expanded scope is theoretically grounded in Social Exchange Theory, which emphasises reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation (Rehman et al., 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023). However, the assumption of balanced exchange may not hold in contexts where rewards are

symbolic rather than material, or where power imbalances limit employees' capacity to negotiate reciprocal value. This highlights once again the interconnected relationship between leadership, human resource practices, and employee engagement, through organisational governance and leadership behaviour.

Prashar and Maity (2024), describe internal branding as a multi-level leadership and systems phenomenon and not merely a marketing function. It involves alignment, communication, culture, leadership behaviours and human resource systems. Internal branding is not key to culture, as stated by Wolfswinkel and Enslin (2022); rather, it is the outcome when communication, leadership behaviours and human resource systems align, which results in an aligned internal brand that influences culture.

Human resource practises such as brand-centred recruitment, training, and socialisation are presented as mechanisms that align employee values with organisational purpose, thereby enhancing creativity and innovation (Yikilmaz, 2023). Brand-centred recruitment is framed as a means of ensuring fairness, transparency, and value alignment, with evidence suggesting that such alignment enhances performance and reduces internal brand building costs (Lauer, 2018; Düger, 2019; Rehman et al., 2019). Similarly, brand-centred training and socialisation are positioned as critical for embedding brand values, reducing role ambiguity, and strengthening emotional commitment (Düger, 2019; Rehman et al., 2019).

Internal communication establishes a common language and is identified as a key enabler in this process, particularly when it incorporates feedback mechanisms and recognition systems that reinforce brand-aligned behaviour (Düger, 2019; Lauer, 2018). Lauer (2018) identifies brand communication as a predictor of both brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour. A further enabler (or dis-enabler) is performance management systems aligned to stakeholder-centric and purpose-driven branding, as opposed to traditional approaches that align primarily to financial outcomes (Enslin *et al.*, 2023).

Yikilmaz (2023) similarly argues for broader accountability frameworks that integrate financial and non-financial criteria. While such frameworks promise more holistic value creation, their implementation introduces measurement challenges, and may generate tensions between competing stakeholder expectations. Identifying stakeholders, assessing their brand promise expectations, and measuring delivery are essential steps for organisational success (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). With clear roles and increased cooperation, the organisation functions as an interconnected system in which employees internalise the values and beliefs of a brand to fulfil its promise (Rehman *et al.*, 2019). This engenders success and cultivates brand ambassadors among those aligned with the values of the organisation (Rehman *et al.*, 2019).

Lauer (2018) states that this is particularly important for employees with lower educational backgrounds, as brand-oriented human resource practices have a greater impact by providing clear guidance, supporting belonging, and signalling value and inclusion. Excessive emphasis on value congruence though, may paradoxically reduce cognitive diversity, potentially constraining the very innovation such practices seek to promote.

The literature converges on the view that leaders and human resource systems play a pivotal role in shaping employee brand attitudes, commitment and ambassadorship, as well as brand value and culture (Düger, 2019). Leaders are conceptualised as sense-makers who socialise the brand through narratives, symbols, and everyday practices (Lauer, 2018). A brand is verbalised through a leader role modelling brand-oriented behaviour (Lauer, 2018). With enhanced employee-leader relations comes brand commitment which boosts customer relations, sales, performance, and customer satisfaction.

Beyond internal alignment, responsible leadership is increasingly framed as extending across the organisational ecosystem. Enslin *et al.* (2023) argue that leaders must transcend profit-centric models to embed brand purpose across all stakeholder interactions, enabling inclusive value creation and socio-economic development. This includes attracting and retaining talent inspired by this

purpose, enabling an aligned internal culture. Responsible leaders guide stakeholders towards the brand's mission, drive positive change, and ensure consistency across all stakeholder interactions to uphold the brand's purpose as a strategic intent (Enslin *et al.*, 2023).

These leaders are accountable, genuine in their intentions, and infuse moral values into the ecosystem of the brand, while building stakeholder trust. Through these practices, they support socio-economic development and exemplify a multi-faceted approach to leadership that transcends individual actions to influence organisational and contextual levels (Enslin *et al.*, 2023). However, this emphasis risks over-personalising brand success and underestimating the influence of organisational structures, informal power dynamics, and external socio-economic conditions. This form of leadership also remains aspirational in many organisational contexts, where short-term performance pressures continue to dominate decision-making.

Additional key insights gained from the internal brand building literature pertinent to the study:

1. Leadership that is purpose-driven, transparent, and value-aligned is essential for internal brand building, aligning operations to the brand promise. However, authenticity gaps erode trust and hinder inclusivity; leader agency and authenticity may not translate uniformly into employee alignment. It can be compounded by structural constraints.
2. Brand-centred recruitment, training, and socialisation ingrain values, align behaviour with the brand promise and cut costs. However, it favours uniformity, and stifles diverse innovation inputs through overemphasis on value congruence.
3. Extra-role behaviour or brand citizenship is critical to delivering the brand promise internally and externally, and boosts brand image via reciprocity. However, it relies on the assumption of a balanced social exchange and reciprocal reward, and is fragile under transactional incentives.

4. Employees must actively support and advocate for the brand through extra-role behaviour. However, extra-role expectations may obscure emotional labour and workload intensification.
5. An aligned culture enables resilience, innovation, and brand consistency, but may mask conflict, dissent, and uneven value internalisation.
6. Brand-aligned human resource practices support innovative climates and performance, but excessive alignment may constrain cognitive diversity and creative tension.

The internal brand building literature highlights leadership and human resource practices as critical enablers of employee engagement, brand citizenship behaviour, and cultural alignment. Internal brand building – key to brand citizenship behaviour – prospers in a culture that is supportive (Lauer, 2018). At the same time, it reveals underlying tensions between control and empowerment, alignment and inclusion, and value congruence and innovation. These tensions underscore the need to examine enabling factors and support mechanisms that cultivate inclusive organisational brand leadership capable of sustaining innovation and change. The following section examines inclusive leadership in relation to change, creativity and innovation, drawing on organisational brand leadership and internal branding literature.

2.4. INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

Inclusive leadership is widely presented as a key driver of innovation, change and employee well-being, yet the literature often under-specifies the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions through which these outcomes emerge in practice (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Lei *et al.*, 2023). In the context of this study, the existing literature will be explored to unearth tensions, gaps and contrasts between idealised, leader-centric accounts and the more complex, systemic realities of organisational brand leadership.

Across the literature, inclusive leadership is framed as an empowering style characterised by accessibility, openness and availability, which is assumed to compound innovation performance at individual, group and inter-group levels over time (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023). However, most studies treat these leader behaviours as inherently beneficial, with limited interrogation of how limited top-down commitment, human resource practices and organisational politics might constrain their actual impact on innovative work behaviours and change outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained or highly institutionalised contexts (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023).

Inclusive leaders actively listen, provide support, and encourage open discussions about concerns, which leads to increased employee engagement and commitment to creative pursuits (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Inclusive leadership has been additionally associated with change-oriented behaviour through the behavioural consistency and trust of a leader (Younas *et al.*, 2020b). More critical attention, though, is needed on moderating or mediating variables such as organisational culture, HR systems, brand values, and external stakeholder pressures (Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022).

This section will explore the key aspects of inclusive leadership, its impact on innovative work behaviour, and the role it plays in driving organisational change and development (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b). While studies highlight its empowering qualities, empirical evidence reveals inconsistencies in its standalone efficacy. This raises questions about its optimal integration into organisational brand leadership for inclusive innovation. Reviewed work provides a largely optimistic, micro-level portrayal of inclusive leadership, with comparatively less attention to how inclusive organisational brand leadership is built, supported and sustained at system level.

While the literature celebrates inclusive leadership over more transactional approaches, it overlooks its limitations relative to entrepreneurial styles in high-stakes innovation contexts (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b). Additionally,

evidence suggests that it only thrives when mediated by trust and behavioural integrity, and not as a universal panacea (Yikilmaz, 2023).

An unaddressed gap in this regard is self-inclusion, linked to Emotional Intelligence (EI), which enables leaders to model vulnerability without compromising strategic direction. This raises doubts; does inclusive leadership truly transcend other styles, or does it merely repackage follower-centric transformational approaches already present in servant, ethical and responsible leadership, with unproven superiority in resource-constrained settings (Lei et al., 2023)?

2.4.1. Inclusive leadership and innovative work behaviour

Inclusive leadership emerges as a potent approach for encouraging employees to generate, advocate for, and implement new ideas or innovations (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Inclusive leaders achieve this by actively listening, providing support, and nurturing open discussions about concerns (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Yikilmaz (2023) highlights that inclusive leaders acknowledge and value subordinate efforts, motivating them to contribute more. Inclusive leadership enhances the likelihood of extra-role behaviours, strengthens employee-leader relationships, and encourages alignment with organisational goals and job satisfaction (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Most studies converge on the assertion that inclusive leadership promotes innovative work behaviour through belonging, psychological safety and trust, and by encouraging idea sharing and extra-role contributions (Javed et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023). Yet this causal chain is often presented as linear and universal. Relatively little attention is given to when inclusive leadership may fail to trigger innovative work behaviour (for example, in low-learning climates, rigidly branded cultures, or under high workload and time pressure) or when it may be experienced differently by distinct groups (e.g., marginalised vs. core employees).

Innovation that surpasses customer expectations stands as a pivotal element for organisational triumph in the current competitive environment (Yikilmaz, 2023). Diversity and inclusion are positioned as essential antecedents of innovation, with inclusion defined as heightened satisfaction with belonging and individuality (Malik, 2023; Yikilmaz, 2023).

The cultivation of an inclusive climate necessitates the practice of inclusive leadership (Yikilmaz, 2023), where leaders appreciate and welcome diverse perspectives, especially within diverse teams (Malik, 2023). When an inclusive organisational climate is present and continual learning is promoted, it enhances the effectiveness of inclusive leadership practices introduced by top management. These practices positively influence lower levels of management (Yikilmaz, 2023). Furthermore, when lower-level managers embrace innovation and entrepreneurship, they are more likely to be open to innovative approaches (Yikilmaz, 2023). The mechanisms by which inclusive practices of top management diffuse to lower-level managers, especially in complex brand architectures or multi-unit organisations, are rarely specified beyond general references to role modelling and culture.

Inclusive leadership, considered a more transformational follower-centric leadership approach promotes innovative work behaviours (Javed et al., 2017; Javed et al., 2019). Javed et al. (2019) highlight a direct correlation between innovative work behaviour and inclusive leadership, through three primary mechanisms (Yikilmaz, 2023). First, by cultivating a sense of belonging and psychological safety, employees are motivated to engage in extra-role behaviours such as innovation. Second, inclusive leaders facilitate an environment where employees feel at ease sharing their ideas, which leads to increased idea generation and confidence in innovation. Third, inclusive leaders establish trust and belonging, which encourages innovative behaviour (Yikilmaz, 2023).

An inclusive leadership style is characterised by strategic thinking, effective communication skills, high EI, and problem-solving abilities grounded in integrative and inclusive values. Inclusive leaders demonstrate flexibility in

resource allocation and actively promote diversity while engaging employees in decision-making processes (Yikilmaz, 2023).

As a result of the inclusive leader's behavioural integrity, these empowered employees are more likely to engage in change-oriented actions, challenge the status quo through innovative work behaviours, and building trust (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023; Younas *et al.*, 2020b). Inclusive leaders encourage boundary-spanning behaviour, belonging, and meaning, which promotes participation in change and innovation (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Yikilmaz (2023) views inclusive leadership as a skill that can be taught. A leader passionate about continuous learning encourages the curiosity and openness required to transition from unawareness to awareness of inclusion (Malik, 2023).

Malik (2023:99) identifies six behaviour traits of inclusive leaders on a continuum:

1. curiosity
2. cognisance of bias
3. cultural intelligence
4. collaboration
5. courage
6. commitment

As leaders become aware of diversity and inclusion issues, they recognise their biases and develop strategies to address them. With that, they progress into the active stage of inclusion (Malik, 2023). In this active stage of inclusion advocacy, inclusive leaders seek cultural intelligence to optimise collaboration through empowerment efforts (Malik, 2023). At the final advocacy stage of inclusive leadership, leaders display courage and commitment by challenging themselves and others while committing resources towards inclusion efforts (Malik, 2023). These leaders exhibit bravery and humility, as they not only understand the business case for inclusion but also feel personally responsible for driving change.

The staged model implicitly assumes linear progression from unawareness to advocacy, while the realities of organisational life may involve regressions, contradictions or selective inclusion aligned with brand or commercial priorities rather than equity or justice.

Social Exchange Theory is commonly invoked to explain why employees reciprocate inclusive behaviour in environments where trust and empowerment are evident (Laloux, 2014; Yikilmaz, 2023). Laloux (2014) emphasises that trust breeds responsibility when individuals are equipped with the resources needed to make informed decisions. Employees who feel included, considered and empowered, tend to perform better and are more receptive to the actions and behaviours of their leader (Yikilmaz, 2023). They reciprocate by becoming more engaged and committed to creativity initiatives through innovative work behaviours (Javed *et al.*, 2017).

Inclusive leaders promote change and development while recognising and rewarding effort. These leaders champion justice, fairness, equity, and collaborative decision-making practices (Yikilmaz, 2023). They nurture psychologically safe environments that encourage efficient and innovative work behaviours within supportive organisational cultures.

Inclusive leaders encourage employee voice, establish psychological contracts (i.e., when employees feel their needs are acknowledged), provide psychological empowerment, and promote psychological capital (i.e., a positive psychological state which enhances employees' capacity to achieve work goals). These factors, in turn, lead to more innovative solutions and enhanced creative work behaviours (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Psychological safety, however, has a considerably greater influence on innovative work behaviours than creative self-efficacy (Yikilmaz, 2023). Psychologically empowered employees experience meaning, competence, impact, and self-determination in relation to their job roles, resulting in more proactive and innovative work behaviours (Javed *et al.*, 2019).

The open, accessible, and communicative nature of inclusive leaders contributes to aligning mutual expectations and workplace abilities. This alignment facilitates innovation, but it is more effective when employees face a moderate level of challenge or pressure (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Key insights gained from the inclusive leadership and innovative work behaviour literature pertinent to the study:

1. Psychological safety and belonging motivates extra-role innovation, mediated by trust, but requires moderate challenge found in an entrepreneurial approach.
2. Leveraging diversity enhances idea generation in teams, but requires the support of human resources and top-down alignment.
3. Empowerment mechanisms including employee voice, psychological contracts and relational capital drive proactivity, but assume reciprocity and are vulnerable to volatility.

2.4.2. Inclusive leadership and change

Inclusive leadership exerts a positive, cross-sectoral influence on an organisation's innovation performance, particularly in industries where employees engage in diverse interconnected activities such as healthcare, education, hospitality, and banking (Yikilmaz, 2023). In the current intricate and competitive business environment, possessing innovative capabilities is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of an organisation. Leadership plays a pivotal role (Younas *et al.*, 2020b).

While this applies across sectors, it is especially important for companies that are operating with limited resources, such as small to medium sized enterprises in emerging markets. For these companies, frugal innovation is key. Lei *et al.* (2023) define frugal innovation as new creations from scarce resources through creative means. To do so, these firms must optimise their human resources, with inclusive leadership playing a crucial role (Lei *et al.*, 2023).

In this context, inclusive leadership becomes a vital element in stimulating the climate necessary for innovation and creativity to thrive (Yikilmaz, 2023). When combined with entrepreneurial behaviour, inclusive leadership strengthens employees' self-efficacy and their awareness of evolving stakeholder expectations, thereby driving business model innovation (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Centralised decision-making disempowers lower-level employees and hampers the efficiency of top management due to information asymmetry, which leads to decreased productivity (Laloux, 2014). Top management must demonstrate the will and intent to develop inclusive leadership behaviours across all levels of the organisation. This requires the support of human resources and effective communication mechanisms to help shift the organisational culture toward one that is inclusive, open to ideas, psychologically aware, resilient, and innovation-focused (Yikilmaz, 2023).

The rejection of authoritarian leadership and centralised decision-making as “outdated” is rhetorically strong, but is rarely supported by robust comparative evidence across different institutional or cultural contexts. Not all centralised structures are necessarily incompatible with inclusive practices, and there may be contexts (e.g., crisis or high-risk environments) where the approach is not ideal. Complex trade-offs need to be considered between control, speed, risk and participation that characterise organisational change. Younas et al. (2020b), however, affirm a direct correlation between change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour and inclusive leadership.

Inclusive leadership is mediated by behavioural integrity, where actions are aligned with commitments and values while openness is maintained without defensiveness. When leaders maintain openness without defensiveness, it builds trust and reduces uncertainty, thereby encouraging change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour (Younas et al., 2020b). Fairness, consideration of employee needs and expectations, open communication, and constructive relationships positively influence an employee's behaviour towards change (Younas et al., 2020b). Inclusive leadership as a leadership method is

fundamentally follower focused; their attention – and thus their behaviours – are on the needs of the followers (Lei *et al.*, 2023).

However, most studies infer behavioural integrity from employee perceptions without fully analysing how organisational structures, brand promises, HR policies and leadership development systems support or undermine those perceptions over time. This points to the importance of examining enabling factors such as perceived alignment between brand values and leadership behaviour, and the availability of support mechanisms (e.g., feedback channels, coaching, and internal communications) that help leaders maintain behavioural integrity under pressure.

Key insights gained from the inclusive leadership and change literature pertinent to the study:

1. Direct correlation exists between change-oriented organisational citizenship behaviour and inclusive leadership. However, an inclusive climate is key, requiring aligned human resource practises and top down support.
2. Inclusive conditions include that of more consultation, dialogue, and contestation into decision-making.
3. Behavioural integrity builds trust and reduces uncertainty, while openness risks defensiveness when leadership lacks EI.
4. Follow focus is needs-based and spurs citizenship, but it lacks the strategic edge of a more entrepreneurial focus.
5. In a resource-stretched environment, the resource demands of building inclusive, psychologically safe cultures remain largely unexplored.

2.4.3. Inclusive leadership behaviours

At the behavioural level, inclusive leadership is conceptualised as a relational style rooted in behavioural integrity. It is manifested through listening, respect, accessibility, openness to ideas, timely appreciation, open dialogue, constructive

feedback, and responsibility for failure (Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Inclusive leadership, a form of transformational leadership, focuses on effective communication, active listening, intentional dialogue, conscious empowerment, and a focus on what constitutes as excellent task performance (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021).

This results in optimal organisational adaptation to change, sustainable organisational performance, and a sustainable societal contribution (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). While these behaviours are useful guidelines, they risk becoming decontextualised checklists that underplay the influence of organisational norms, workload, digital communication practices and brand expectations on leaders' capacity to act inclusively on a sustained basis.

Enhancing accessibility as a social model, though, teaches competencies through prompt feedback and shared power dynamics, leaving employees empowered to make decisions autonomously (Javed *et al.*, 2019). This does not replace the role of structural supports (e.g., decision rights, information access, training and psychological empowerment) in enabling employees to exercise that autonomy without fear of sanctions.

Accessibility supported by open dialogue builds loyalty and trust while focusing on future performance empowers employees to work independently (Javed *et al.*, 2019). An empowered employee is more inclined to engage in the trial-and-error approach of generating new ideas (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Psychological empowerment is further reinforced by having a clear vision of continuous innovation expectations, recognising innovative efforts, granting autonomy in performance tasks, and defining roles and expectations clearly (Javed *et al.*, 2019). This includes what constitutes mistakes or failures. Learning from mistakes is a catalyst for growth; it enhances knowledge, creativity, innovation, and overall performance (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023).

Admitting mistakes can be daunting and requires a sense of safety, and inclusive leadership has been positively associated with stimulating psychological safety

within the workplace (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). It is a relational leadership style that stands out as capable of transcending single-loop learning, delving into the root causes of errors, expediting recovery, and preventing the recurrence of these errors (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023).

Inclusive leaders actively seek insights, value contributions, and offer feedback. With such, they create a psychologically safe environment where failures can be acknowledged, lessons learned and knowledge exchanged (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). They inquire about failures, their origins, and the insights gained. Their openness and accessibility empower employees to share mistakes with the assurance of being heard, supported and provided with constructive feedback rather than facing punishment or criticism (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Notwithstanding this, the literature does not sufficiently contextualise the roles that systems of accountability and clarity, data availability, organisational tolerance for failure in brand-sensitive contexts (where errors may threaten reputation, customer trust, or regulatory compliance), and cross-functional collaboration play.

In adaptive cultures, knowledge and learning are active processes. These occur both inside and outside the organisation, as innovation relies on access to substantial, high-quality information (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024). Such adaptive cultures, therefore, see customers as rich sources of knowledge. They are service-centric, they actively observe client behaviour, and take their feedback seriously (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). According to AlSaied and Alkhoraif (2024), innovation is enhanced through a growth mindset (learning through experiences, experiments, and failures), knowledge, understanding, agility, collaboration, and empowerment.

However, the literature rarely connects these customer-centric practices explicitly to inclusive organisational leadership. Javed *et al.* (2019) and Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), however, highlight a direct relationship between innovative work behaviour, continuous improvement and inclusive leadership with psychological empowerment acting as a mediator. When an employee feels understood and

valued, they are more inspired to innovate. The resulting collaboration, knowledge sharing, and learning enable sustainable competitiveness (Lei et al., 2023). Moreover, empathy and kindness combined with a dedication to an employees' development towards achieving their goals contribute to the perception of behavioural integrity in a leader, thereby supporting innovative work behaviour.

Demonstrating faith in a staff members' abilities and aligning actions with words enhances trust. Laloux (2014) describes a radical approach to decision making, whereby any staff member may make a decision after they have sought adequate and appropriate advice. Not only does this approach ensure that the employee is adequately informed, but that the provider of the advice also feels valued. Therefore, it also builds the community and strengthens relations between the giver and receiver (Laloux, 2014).

Asking for advice also reflects humility, contributes to a positive and engaging workplace, and provides opportunities for real-time learning (Laloux, 2014). Laloux (2014) concludes that decisions are often sounder, because the employee is closer to the issue, and the process itself mirrors the joy found in team sports. The employee gains wisdom through knowledge-sharing, and initiative and creativity are stimulated. Though advice-seeking decision models and distributed decision rights offer alternatives to hierarchical control, their transferability across sectors and cultures, and their compatibility with formalised brand governance structures, warrants further scrutiny.

Key insights gained from the inclusive leadership behaviours literature pertinent to the study:

1. Learning from failure, root-cause analysis and knowledge sharing – aspects that are key to innovation – are daunting without a leader who are comfortable with vulnerability.
2. Employee autonomy and dialogue builds loyalty and independent innovation, but relies on vision clarity.

3. Behavioural integrity, effective communication, active listening, collaboration, intentional dialogue and conscious empowerment support psychological safety and promote individual self-efficacy. It enables growth and agility, but it needs Emotional Intelligence.
4. A direct relationship between inclusive leadership, continuous improvement and innovative work behaviour is evident, but seems to be little explicit connection to customer-centric practices, nor the impact of formalised governance structures.

While the emphasis of servant leadership is on consensus, responsible leadership focuses on stakeholder accountability, and ethical leadership emphasises moral integrity. Inclusive leadership, however, empowers individual autonomy, promotes knowledge agility and growth mindsets, and maximises innovation output.

The frequent positioning of inclusive leadership as a form of transformational leadership blurs conceptual boundaries, as both emphasise communication, empowerment and change orientation. For this study, the overlap between inclusive and transformational leadership, as well as the notion that entrepreneurial leadership can enhance the efficacy of inclusive leadership, raises an important question: which combinations of leadership behaviours, enabling factors, and support mechanisms yield inclusive organisational brand leadership that is genuinely optimal (rather than merely favourable) for innovation and change?

Inclusive behaviours demand psychological empowerment and safety that is often underdeveloped in leaders lacking self-inclusion. The following section explores self-inclusion in leadership as a possible mediator of inclusive leadership.

2.4.4. Self-inclusion in leadership

Lu, Wang, Zhang, Wang, Sun and Zou (2022) suggest a relationship between self-inclusion, or self-acceptance, and Emotional Intelligence (EI), noting that self-inclusion can be promoted and improved through EI. EI can be described as the

ability to guide thoughts and subsequent behaviour through awareness and the management of emotions and moods (Lu et al., 2022). Lu et al. (2022) assert that EI is a crucial psychological concept; it is essential for a successful, healthy, happy, and adaptable life.

Rodriguez et al. (2015) refer to empirical evidence linking self-inclusion (consciously recognising and accepting all the good and bad parts of yourself) to personal well-being. They suggest that mindfulness, a component of EI, may be one path to achieving self-inclusion. David and Congleton (2022) refer to mindful, values-driven leaders as emotionally agile and best suited to navigating the current rapidly changing and complex era, noting that these leaders are more innovative. These leaders experience less stress and more adaptability (Lu et al., 2022). This increased adaptability primes them for growth and enables them to approach problems more rationally and to seek solutions, thus accelerating innovation (Lu et al., 2022).

Self-inclusion is distinct from self-esteem. The latter refers to how much one *likes* oneself relative to their personal standard. Replacing self-esteem with self-inclusion results in 'a decrease in the level of irrationality of cognitive processes' (Florica & Tasente, 2022:373).

Unlike self-esteem, self-inclusion does not depend on approval from others or one's own view of achievements (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Self-esteem has been found to be correlated with narcissism and does not reduce anxiety when considering weaknesses, while self-inclusion correlates with higher resilience (Yadav, 2016).

Even when faced with unfavourable circumstances, self-inclusion aids rational thinking, reducing irrational fear and enabling greater tolerance for frustration and holistic acceptance of oneself, others, and the world (Florica & Tasente, 2022). This leads to increased flexibility and a higher probability of achieving goals (Florica & Tasente, 2022).

Self-inclusion makes a leader more innovative, given their increased adaptability to new challenges, and encourages greater collaboration with others. As failure is the platform for learning during the prototyping of new ideas, the irrational fear of failure, particularly within a leader, may inhibit innovation. When a leader consciously or unconsciously dwells on failure, and cognitive dissonance arises because results do not meet expectations, this can lead to a low tolerance for stress, which is considered a maladaptive response to leadership in contemporary times (Florica & Tasente, 2022).

The literature suggests that leaders who cannot accept their own strengths and weaknesses may struggle to accept others without judgement (Yadav, 2016). This judgement, especially from a leader, impedes the inclusion necessary for embracing diversity and successfully collaborating for innovation. It also hinders psychological safety within an environment. Yet, empirical evidence directly connecting leaders' self-inclusion to employees' perceptions of inclusion, psychological safety and brand identification, remains limited.

Psychological safety is thought to be a key component of an inclusive organisational brand culture that empowers people to prototype, make mistakes, learn, and grow without attaching their perceived mistakes to their self-worth (Padav, 2016). In fact, mistakes are viewed as sources of knowledge that are intentionally shared to serve as protection against an unpredictable future, as they contribute to cultural adaptability, creativity and innovation (Vladić *et al.*, 2021; Randel, 2023).

These inclusive organisational brand cultures are not only more innovative (Randel, 2023), but also stronger, as they realise more individual and collective potential through collaboration. In the field of innovation, 'collaboration is crucial' (Vladić *et al.*, 2021:136). Few studies, however, explicitly address how organisational brand narratives, reward systems and performance management practices influence how mistakes are genuinely treated as learning opportunities instead of covertly punished.

Korkmaz et al. (2022) emphasise the leader-employee connection as instrumental in enabling employees to perform at their highest potential in the workplace. This collective environment could be described as an inclusive organisational brand culture, where employees and leaders know and appreciate all aspects of themselves without compromise (Ferdman & Deane, 2014). Inclusive leaders excel in four key areas (Figure 8).

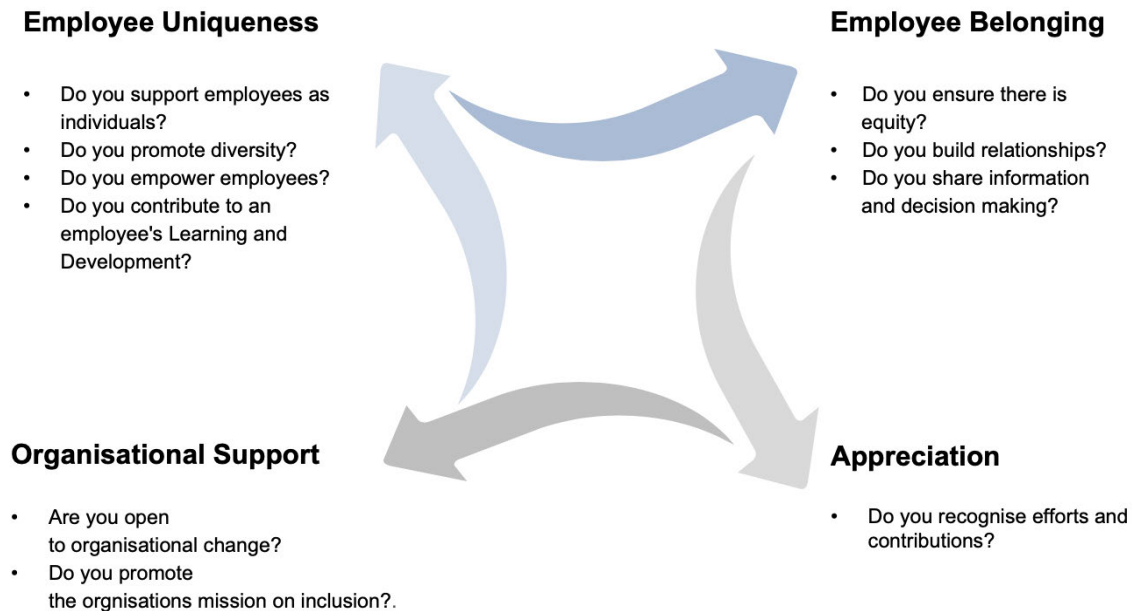


Figure 8: A model for inclusive organisational brand leadership (Adapted from Korkmaz et al., 2022)

Inclusive leaders focus on what makes an employee unique through support, empowerment, learning and development, and the promotion of diversity; they emphasise belonging within the team through equity, relationships, and shared decision-making. They also show appreciation by recognising contributions and efforts, and they support organisational change by enabling inclusion (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Optimal Distinctiveness Theory suggests that uniqueness and belonging are human needs that must be experienced simultaneously to ensure efficacy (Korkmaz et al., 2022).

The practical challenges of balancing uniqueness and belonging under brand, market, and regulatory constraints, though, remains largely theoretical. The literature identifies the four domains in which inclusive leaders excel, but gives less attention to how these domains are supported by concrete organisational

mechanisms (e.g., internal brand communications, diversity metrics, learning systems) or how tensions between uniqueness and belonging are navigated in real organisational settings.

Key insights gained from the self-inclusion in leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. Self-inclusion is supported by EI. It necessitates self-acceptance, enabling openness and adaptability, reducing stress, and increasing rational problem-solving, but it is not innate. Developmental gaps still exist.
2. Self-inclusion reduces judgement and fear of failure or mistakes in self and others, it boosts inclusive behaviours and thus leadership, while influencing collaboration, harnessing diversity, boosting innovation output, and supporting psychological safety.
3. Self-esteem may bolster resilience and flexibility without approval, but fears may block a leader's vulnerability.
4. Optimal efficacy requires organisational support structures and mechanisms.

The emerging construct of self-inclusion (necessitating self-acceptance as an enabler) extends the inclusive leadership discussion inward by linking leaders' Emotional Intelligence and mindfulness to adaptability, rationality, and innovation.

While this intrapersonal focus usefully foregrounds the psychological preconditions of inclusive leadership, the literature largely treats self-inclusion as an individual attribute rather than examining its relational and organisational implications, for example, how the self-acceptance of a leader shapes their responses to failure, their openness to feedback about brand inconsistencies, or their ability to hold inclusive conversations under pressure.

There is limited evidence of critical examination of how self-inclusion develops over time in leaders, how it interacts with organisational demands, or how it is supported (or hindered) by leadership development, coaching, feedback and

internal brand narratives. This presents a conceptual opening that positions self-inclusion as a potential mediating factor that links Emotional Intelligence, psychological safety and inclusive organisational brand leadership, particularly in high-change, innovation-intensive environments.

Inclusive leadership aligns with the requirements of internal brand building alongside systemic, brand-aligned human resource practices to cultivate aligned cultures. An inclusive culture, supported by inclusive leadership is particularly well suited to innovative work behaviour and adaptation to change.

However, the literature shows that entrepreneurial leadership and the practice of marginally challenging employees (both hallmarks of more transactional approaches) can further enhance the efficacy of inclusive leadership in cultivating innovative work behaviour. This juxtaposition reveals an unresolved tension between relational inclusion and performance-focused challenge. It suggests that optimal inclusive organisational brand leadership for innovation and change may require a calibrated blend of inclusive, transformational, entrepreneurial and transactional practices, underpinned by specific mediating psychological factors and organisational support mechanisms.

Finally, the literature positions inclusive leadership as richly promising yet built on a fragmented foundation. It lacks a clear assessment of the enabling factors and support mechanisms that shape the emergence of inclusion within inclusive organisational brand leadership. The emerging emphasis on self-inclusion as a key mediator introduces a vital intrapersonal dimension, potentially underpinning the capacity of leaders to embody inclusive brand values, tolerate failure, and sustain psychological safety in innovation-driven environments.

The following section will explore leading change in greater depth, with specific reference to inclusive leadership. It will explore the key aspects of leading change, including the function of leadership communication, Emotional Intelligence, and organisational culture, drawing insights from academic research and practical

examples. It seeks to explore inclusive organisational brand leadership as the style most suited to change and innovation, incorporating creativity.

2.5. LEADING CHANGE

The literature consistently positions leading change as a function of articulating a compelling vision, providing strategic direction, and inspiring collective commitment (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). While this framing foregrounds visionary leadership as central to change success, it arguably risks underemphasising the mediating mechanisms – communication processes, emotional regulation, and cultural alignment – through which such vision is enacted. In increasingly volatile business environments, leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to clarity of direction alone; rather, it depends on how that direction is socially constructed, communicated, and operationalised (Men *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, leaders who create a culture of innovation that is characterised by openness, collaboration, and risk-taking, are more likely to drive organisational adaptability and sustainable competitiveness in pursuit of a vision (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

Strategic leadership is conceptualised as an interpersonal and relational process that involves reciprocal influence between leaders and followers (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). This perspective contrasts with more hierarchical understandings of leadership, reframing it as co-constructed influence grounded in character, vision, and strategy. Emotionally intelligent leaders catalyse change building the trust of their followers through ‘passion, enthusiasm, knowledge, and skill’ (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023:4). Yet, the literature suggests that Emotional Intelligence (EI) operates less as an isolated trait and more as a mediating capability that enhances communication credibility, relational trust, and behavioural modelling.

Leaders who intentionally communicate with clarity and consistency reduce ambiguity, stimulate dialogue, and enhance change adoption (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Conversely, insufficient communication

undermines trust and increases resistance. These leaders communicate with consistency, ensuring that all staff are aware of the change, how it will impact them, and its anticipated benefits (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

The vision of the future is broken down into challenging, achievable goals and objectives that are clear, communicated and measured (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). This results in staff who feel involved and empowered. They seek to create an organisational system that cohesively and coherently supports the change through strategic leadership. When an executive adequately communicates change, ensuring it is well received, dialogued, understood and role modelled, it creates trust, which results in a commitment towards the change (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

Furthermore, decentralisation of decision-making and knowledge sharing emerge as structural supports for change implementation (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Odor, 2018; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). This echoes the foundational aspects of an inclusive culture as led by inclusive leaders, with more of a focus on the vision and strategy for change and the aspect of role modelling change – an approach which is reminiscent of entrepreneurial leadership. However, the literature does not uniformly reconcile tensions between decentralisation and strategic coherence; it leaves open questions regarding optimal governance configurations during large-scale transformation.

Overall, while leading change is widely associated with vision and inspiration, the evidence suggests that mediating mechanisms namely trust, emotional regulation, decentralised knowledge exchange, and communication consistency, are decisive in determining whether vision translates into innovation and adaptability.

Key insights gained from the leading change literature pertinent to the study:

1. Strategic leaders communicate a vision, direction and inspire movement towards that vision. There is a limited focus on mediating processes that translate a vision into behaviour.

2. Leadership communication should be clear and consistent to build trust and commitment. Poor communication increases resistance and ambiguity.
3. Emotional Intelligence (EI) catalyses trust and follower support. However, it should be seen as a mediator, and not a standalone determinant.
4. Decentralisation and knowledge sharing enhances adaptability and implementation of change, but governance tensions are underexplored.
5. Leading change is reminiscent of creating an inclusive culture led by inclusive leaders, but with more focus on the vision and strategy for change and the aspect of role modelling change – an approach which is reminiscent of entrepreneurial leadership.

2.5.1. Culture, change, innovation and inclusion

2.5.1.1 Culture and change

The literature reveals significant definitional ambiguity surrounding organisational culture (Coulson-Thomas, 2015; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016; Odor, 2018). While consensus exists that culture comprises tangible and intangible elements – beliefs, values, norms, and artefacts – that regulate the way an employee thinks, feels, and conducts themselves (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016), empirical comparison is complicated by a lack of conceptual uniformity. Schein's foundational work frames culture as a learned system of shared assumptions that are developed through problem-solving and adaptation. Schein emphasises its deep, often unconscious character (1986; 2000). In contrast, more contemporary accounts foreground the strategic utility of culture in shaping competitive advantage (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016). In order to remain relevant, the process of internal organisational integration and external market adaptation should be fluid and not fixed (Coulson-Thomas, 2015).

According to Schein (1986) and Odor (2018), culture is created or learned through experience, including the meanings of images and symbols that are transmitted

from previous generations, or created by the self. Palumbo and Douglas (2024), reference culture as shared values (implicit and explicit), concepts, ideas and behavioural rules, or the expression of the unconscious mind of business. Schein (1986) indicates that culture is a deep phenomenon, a pattern of unconscious shared beliefs and assumptions that is formed as an automatic response to solving a problem. It influences perception, thinking, feeling and interacting.

Culture shapes behaviour, is shaped by behaviour, and changes slowly (Palumbo & Douglas, 2024). It is both visible and invisible, encompassing tangible elements such as dress codes, ceremonies and rituals, social and physical environments, metaphors, symbols, language, and comradery, as well as the underlying values and norms that give rise to these artefacts (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Odor, 2018).

The culture of an organisation is a key determinant of its success (Ordor, 2018). Ulrich and Brockbank (2016), after researching 1500 companies, found that culture is two to four times more impactful than individual talent, yet current human resource practices often focus on developing individual talent rather than supporting collective cultures. This emphasis on the individual results in an organisation that is merely the sum of its parts, rather than greater than its parts (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016). Competitive advantage, therefore, does not come from the talent an organisation acquires, but from how that talent is harnessed through culture in alignment with strategic objectives (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016).

Similarly, Ordor (2018) posits that organisational culture is not only synonymous with success but is also a critical factor in attracting and retaining talent. Supporting this view, Hogan and Coote (2014) highlight empirical evidence showing that culture influences organisational performance more than structure or strategy; it shapes employee behaviour and knowledge in ways that systems or procedures alone cannot.

Schein (2000) highlights that organisations are different, that there is no single cultural norm, and that the life stage of the organisation (start up, at mid-life or mature) influences beliefs and assumptions. Ulrich and Brockbank (2016) define

the evolution of culture as occurring in three phases. The first phase involves rituals, symbols, and stories through events. The second phase concerns how employees think, feel, and behave, and is shaped by values and beliefs. The third phase is an organisational identity, or brand promise, held in the minds of stakeholders and made real by employees.

Critically, while culture is often portrayed as a determinant of organisational success, the literature diverges regarding whether culture should precede strategy, or if strategy should precede culture. Ulrich and Brockbank (2016) propose that a firm should start with a brand promise that aligns the objectives of the organisation, through the lens of leadership, with the needs of customers and shareholders. This brand promise should then be intellectualised to staff through various communication platforms. Once this is done, specific behaviours should be articulated to collectively support the realisation of the brand promise, while human resources utilise the practices that govern the organisation and ensure their alignment. Practises include 'staffing, training, promotion, measurement, compensation, organisational design, information management, physical arrangements and leadership development' (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016:54).

Similarly, Schein (2000) believes that before an organisation looks to its practises to change its culture, it should first consider what the business wants to achieve, how culture will support that, and use business results as a metric. This tension reflects an unresolved theoretical debate; whether culture is primarily an input, output, or co-evolving system within organisational change.

Odor (2018:3) references seven characteristics of organisational culture that operates on a continuum:

1. innovation and risk taking
2. attention to detail
3. outcome
4. people orientation

5. team orientation
6. aggressiveness
7. stability

2.5.1.2 Innovation and inclusion

Hogan and Coote (2014) empirically examined the norms, values and artefacts that promote innovative work behaviour, and found the following value dimensions supportive of innovation: 'success, openness and flexibility, internal communication, competence and professionalism, inter-functional cooperation, responsibility of employees, appreciation of employees, and risk-taking' (Hogan & Coote, 2014:1611).

The strength of organisational cultures is defined by the behavioural alignment within the organisation towards the organisation's goals or towards compliance with rules and regulations (Odor, 2018). Schein (1986) emphasises the importance of examining not only the organisation's strategy, goals, structure and systems, and their influence on culture, but also the external environmental factors, such as how power and status are considered. For successful innovation, clear and consistent narratives of innovation are important. It should signal to employees what is expected of them, coordinate action, share information, and inspire innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

Ulrich and Brockbank (2016) support the creation of a process – a behavioural and intellectual agenda – that supports the desired culture and where employees learn behaviours from leaders. Employees learn values, norms, behaviours, and competence through observation, and 'culture is a social learning process' (Schein, 1986:31). Leaders support the development of knowledge sharing (Schein, 2000). It should be selected, developed, evaluated, and promoted in alignment with the desired culture as they shape the employee brand while encouraging people to think, feel, and act in ways that uphold the brand promise (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016).

This becomes more critical in times of change, as concepts and rules within an organisation become normalised over time through positive reinforcement and the avoidance of pain (Schein, 1986). Unlearning what has been normalised invokes anxiety. It requires leadership strength and responsibility to provide the safety needed to guide employees through change and uncertainty, and initiate a new learning process (Schein, 1986).

An inclusive culture is considered a valuable organisational asset, as it supports knowledge-sharing networks, enables the rapid movement of resources, and encourages collaboration – all of which contribute to innovation through the effective utilisation of human capital (Lei *et al.*, 2023). Innovative cultures empower employees to apply, experiment with, and seek knowledge for the purpose of creating new value in the form of enhanced or new products and services (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024).

The highest performing organisations empower and involve employees and promote behaviour that consistently shows commitment to the organisations values (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). Weak cultures are led by perceived autocratic leaders, and strong cultures are the output of collaboration and shared beliefs and values (Odor, 2018). Both forms of culture will replicate themselves in an organisational system, in that an average performer can become exemplary, and an exemplary employee can become average (Odor, 2018).

Employees who are socially integrated into an organisation are more adaptable to change. They seem to exhibit innovative work behaviour compared to those who maintain social distance and cling to the status quo (Javed *et al.*, 2017). Adaptation to change is vital for sustainable competitiveness (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023), achieved through experimentation, leadership sponsorship and a culture of consistent growth and learning (Hekneby & Olsen, 2024). However, an successful organisation today is not guaranteed success in the future, unless they are adaptive to change and are able to respond fluidly to dynamic environments (Odor, 2018).

Coulson-Thomas (2015) conducted a five-year study to investigate more efficient ways to achieve high performance than through cultural change. In his study, Coulson-Thomas (2015) challenges the primacy of cultural change and argues that behavioural interventions may achieve faster performance outcomes. This is particularly true for organisations that operate across different geographical and customer markets, with diverse internal and external stakeholders.

In these instances, a universal set of values intended to govern a culture may be overly generalised, exclusionary, and counterproductive to innovation (Coulson-Thomas, 2015). Rather, when staff are better supported, informed, educated, equipped, and enabled, they perform better and are more adaptable to changing circumstances (Coulson-Thomas, 2015, Chung *et al.*, 2020). This is achieved through inclusive leadership operating within an inclusive environment as opposed to an inclusive culture. The latter may be conceptually misleading, given that culture implies value alignment as opposed to access, support and enablement.

Hogan and Coote (2014) conducted empirical research on Schein's conceptual framework of organisational culture and concluded that it can be broadly defined as organisational values, including guiding principles and philosophies, which are expressed through social expectations (norms), visible symbols and structures (artefacts), and consistent behavioural patterns. If social expectations promote the sharing of information for the purposes of the new, this can engender innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014), and should therefore be the primary focus on inclusive environments.

The question, therefore, emerges: What will enable better access, support and enablement for employees?

Arguably, performance support rather than incentivisation, combined with appropriate checks and balances, leads to more sustainable behavioural change. It delivers greater customer value by integrating learning, reinforcing positive behaviour, and enabling employees to tackle demanding tasks while

strengthening stakeholder relationships (Coulson-Thomas, 2015). This finding introduces a critical contrast; while an inclusive culture is idealised as foundational for innovation, targeted performance support mechanisms may be more pragmatic in complex, geographically dispersed organisations.

An inclusive environment, is regarded as one that is fair to all and transparent in action. Such an environment promotes a culture of learning that considers diverse views when strategising, and focuses on equality and diversity (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019). Such an inclusive organisation has adequate representation, shows respect for all, recognises the views of all, and adequately rewards effort (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019).

The benefits of inclusion encompass a higher likelihood of innovation driven by richer ideas and more diverse skills, along with increased employee loyalty and improved customer service (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019). Yet implementation complexity remains substantial, requiring systemic HR alignment, leadership modelling, and participatory communication. Thus, inclusion functions not merely as an ethical aspiration but as a structural enabler of adaptability and innovative work behaviour.

Praveenadevi and Girimurugan (2019) propose five strategies; to extend the recruitment pool of the organisation, train middle management, form a cross-sectional inclusion committee, celebrate differences, and to actively listen to employees as part of a broader commitment to effective communication.

An organisational environment built on shared value, cooperation, and mutual assistance has a competitive advantage, as it enables employers to adapt to change and be creative (Odor, 2018). This is especially relevant in a decentralised environment where decision making is fluid and responsive, ensuring adaptability to changing environments (Odor, 2018). Additionally, the more teamwork, openness, information sharing, and staff morale are boosted, the better aligned staff are to the organisations mission (Odor, 2018).

Key insights gained from the inclusive cultures, change, and inclusive leadership literature pertinent to the study:

1. The definition of culture across literature is conceptually fragmented but revolves around shared values, norms and artefacts that shape behaviour towards either the organisation's goals, or towards compliance with rules and regulations.
2. Culture drives competitive advantage, but there is a debate as to whether culture precedes, or follows strategy. The question is whether culture serves as an input, output, or co-evolving system.
3. Innovation cultures can be identified with traits such as openness, flexibility, risk-taking, collaboration, and clear and consistent narratives of innovation.
4. Inclusive cultures are valuable organisational assets and effectively utilise human capital by enabling adaptability and innovative work behaviour.
5. Inclusive cultures can be identified by traits like fairness, diversity, participation and innovation. However, implementation may be complex because it requires leadership modelling, participatory communication, decentralised knowledge flows, and human resource alignment
6. Universal sets of values may be counterproductive to innovation, better staff support, education, and enablement. It promotes adaptability and may affect cultural change faster.
7. Leaders should be selected in alignment with the desired culture as they shape the employee, especially in times of change.
8. Strategic leaders align staff to change, but inclusive leaders operating within inclusive environments that promote access, support and enablement, are more effective for driving innovation and change.

Therefore, the literature suggests that a co-evolving inclusive system, or environment, is optimal for innovation and change through staff support,

education, and enablement. Such a system drives adaptability and innovative work behaviour.

Leadership is especially critical during periods of change; inclusive leadership best suits this context, although inclusive leaders must also possess strategic skills and act strategic on it.

2.5.2. Strategic leadership and change

Malambe and Toendepi (2023) argue that leaders at all levels need heightened EI to effectively lead change. This view also aligns with the perspective of Coulson-Thomas (2015) regarding the importance of performance support during change initiatives. Malambe and Toendepi (2023) further postulate that leaders are made, not born; they are formed through training, experience, education, and personal mastery. Personal mastery is acquired through the awareness of personal thoughts, feelings, values, and aspirations, and how they impact on others (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). These emotionally intelligent leaders catalyse change through, 'passion, enthusiasm, knowledge and skill in leading change for followers to trust them' (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023:4). They seek to create an organisational system that cohesively and coherently supports the change. Strategic leadership is an interpersonal process involving an interplay between those who influence and those who respond to being influenced. It also represents an amalgamation of character, vision and strategy, with leading change as a key component (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

Strategic leaders communicate a clear vision, provide direction towards it, and inspire its attainment, boosting the adoption of; change, organisational, and staff performance, as well as morale (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). These leaders communicate intentionally with consistency and clarity of purpose, ensuring that all staff are aware of the change, how it will impact them, and the benefits of such (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). The vision of the future is broken down into challenging, achievable goals and objectives that are clear, communicated and measured (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021).

When healthy relations, clear and consistent communication, and change dialogue are absent, trust is breached and negativity or resistance to change occurs (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). The primary responsibility rests with the Chief Executive Officer, the senior leadership team, and the agents of change to ensure the organisational strategy is adequately communicated, well received, dialogued, understood and role modelled (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). This cultivates trust, which builds commitment and supports change. When trust is established, employees believe they are well led, which ultimately contribute to a positive organisational culture (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Vision communication remains central; however, the literature demonstrates that vision alone does not secure change adoption. Trust emerges as the primary mediating variable.

Effective change implementation is further aided by delegation, particularly in decision-making and the sharing of knowledge (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Odor, 2018; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). In the absence of healthy relational dynamics and dialogue, resistance intensifies. In light of the mediating factors that were described here, the profile that emerges reveals that of an inclusive culture. Such an organisational culture is supported and enabled by inclusive leaders with a pronounced emphasis on a clear vision and strategy for change, rather than leadership that is predicated solely on strategic imperatives.

Various cultures can be adaptable, bureaucratic, mission-driven, or entrepreneurial, but adaptable cultures are arguably the most suited for change (Odor, 2018). A change-ready culture is one that is open and adaptive. It is confident in, and committed to the change, and capable of implementing it (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). In a change-ready culture, a negative response or resistance is seen as feedback and an opportunity to dialogue, with the potential to adapt (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). These cultures are participative and promote commitment through involvement, and not manipulative through power struggles (Odor, 2018). While participatory environments are more conducive to innovation, the literature often assumes adaptability as inherently desirable without interrogating trade-offs such as reduced control or strategic drift.

The ideal leader is, 'passionate, creative, flexible, inspiring, innovative, courageous, imaginative and experimental' (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023:10). Malambe and Toendepi (2023), further emphasise the role of EI in acquiring the social skills required to present, communicate, and facilitate the change process, as well as build strong follower relations. While the literature strongly affirms EI as essential for change leadership, it increasingly conceptualises EI as developmental rather than innate. This contrasts with trait-based assumptions and reinforces the importance of training, coaching, and personal mastery. These leaders are described as enlightened leaders who envision the direction of the change. Furthermore, they can persuade followers through communication to embark on and sustain the change journey (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Innovation, considered the creation of new value – preceded by an openness to change – is crucial to success in dynamic markets and is the result of a culture of innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

More specifically, innovative work behaviour rests on the norms and artefacts that promote it, and not on organisational values alone (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Norms and artefacts that intentionally promote innovative behaviours, such as stories of innovation, rituals, office layout and language, will assist in greater organisational innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Hogan and Coote's (2014) empirical research into organisational culture for innovation highlighted that organisations need to show clear value for calculated risk-taking and challenges to the status quo, it needs to appreciate and acknowledge employee contributions, and promote collaboration and 'success, openness, flexibility and internal communication' (Hogan & Coote, 2014:1618). Leaders who are respectful and appreciative act as promoters and catalysts of organisational innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014). These leaders consciously use artefacts to communicate and endorse values and norms, and create spaces for the exchange of new ideas (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

Leaders need to improve their leadership style through training and coaching (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021), and develop cultures that are inclusive, participatory, and supportive. Internal brand building – key to the brand citizenship behaviour required for innovation – prospers in a culture that is supportive (Lauer, 2018).

Lasrado and Kassem argue that only 'involvement culture has a positive effect on organisational excellence' (2021:185) and business results. An engaged and empowered workforce also realises excellence through creativity and flexibility, while business success requires the optimisation of both quality management practices and organisational culture (Palumbo & Douglas, 2024).

Lauer's (2018) findings on internal brand building confirm that communication is a key predictor of not only brand commitment, but also brand citizenship behaviour. Leaders help create culture and reinforce it through communication and actions (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). To be change agents, leaders need to be strategic, collaborative, capable, inspiring, confident, innovative, compassionate, open, available, and accessible (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). They need to present a well-defined vision for change and articulate how everyone contributes to-, and benefits from it (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Leaders must communicate their vision for change in a clear manner (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023).

Key insights gained from the strategic leadership and change literature pertinent to the study:

1. EI in a leader is essential for change; it is developmental rather than innate.
2. Trust and dialogue are mediating variables for change success. Without them, resistance intensifies.
3. Participative structures are best suited for innovation and change, while delegation and knowledge sharing enhance adaptability. However, the risk of strategic incoherence is underexplored.
4. Adaptable cultures are best suited for change, but the trade-offs of flexibility are insufficiently examined.
5. An inclusive culture is participative and adaptable. It is underpinned by respectful, inclusive leaders with a pronounced emphasis on a clear vision and strategy for change, excellent communication skills, and a clear value for innovation and employee appreciation.

Therefore, inclusive leadership is optimal for change and innovation, but is contingent upon role-modelling innovation, employee appreciation, EI, effective communication, and strategic leadership skills that are supported by participative structures.

2.5.3. Change and leadership communication

Communication is positioned as the 'central, defining, and constitutive feature of leadership' (Men *et al.*, 2020:3). It is the process through which leader connect with, and influence their stakeholders. It also involves installing a culture through the communication of organisational purpose and values (Men *et al.*, 2020). Leadership could then be considered a process of social influence, where communication is co-constructed and co-defined in a reciprocal, mutually causal system between the message originator and receiver (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Leadership possibility is realised through recipient resonance, activation or trigger, and a network of recipients becomes a 'self-generating, self-organising and self-sustaining system' with 'multiple feedback loops' (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021:950). Unlike transactional information exchange, leadership communication reconceptualises leadership, and potentially shifts it from a leadership style to a communicative process.

2.5.3.1. Trust as a mediator of communication

Effective leadership communication is not only about influencing actions but also about cultivating trust that allows stakeholders to fully and confidently engage with change. In a dynamic and unpredictable world, stakeholder trust is critical (Men *et al.*, 2020). Based on a survey of 439 employees who had experienced organisational change, Men *et al.* (2020) argue that charismatic executive communication is key to creating the trust that is needed to positively influence employees' openness to, and support for the change.

Charismatic executive communication encompasses three elements, namely envisioning, energising, and enabling. Envisioning encompasses communicating a clear meaningful reason for change, an image of a future aspiration, and a

roadmap to get there. Energising refers to igniting passion, positivity, and excitement towards achieving that vision. This instils confidence in its attainment, through genuine belief. Enabling involves humanising the change journey by showing compassion and offering support while nurturing the belief of employees in their own ability. This is the essential spark for building change self-efficacy (Men *et al.*, 2020).

Trust building is not an instant process. Efforts bear fruit over time through reciprocal risk-taking and is underpinned by four aspects; integrity (fairness and justice), dependability (doing what is said), competence (being able to do what is said) and benevolence (acts of kindness) (Men *et al.*, 2020). Trust is the coherence between what is said and unsaid, or the values underpinning actions and behaviours (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015; Saputra, 2021).

Effective, open, and direct communication from the executive with all stakeholders is essential for building and maintaining that trust. This, in turn, enables change, inspires organisational success (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015), and influences employee performance (Kalogiannidis, 2020; Men *et al.*, 2020).

Trust often hinges not just on words, but on the alignment between spoken messages and the unspoken values that are reflected in actions and behaviours (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015; Saputra, 2021). Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) list the values and behaviours like clarity, consistency, fairness, reliability, integrity, openness, active listening, competence, passion, and humility as key.

2.5.3.2. Relationship focused communication

Rabiul *et al.* (2023) recommend comprehensive communication training for all leaders, and particularly for Chief Executive Officers (Lee & Kim, 2022). Executive public speaking particularly remains an underexplored area within leadership research (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015), yet it involves several critical elements like clarity of purpose, logical coherence, speaker credibility, emotional engagement, and the ability to connect meaningfully with the audience (Saputra, 2021).

Effective leaders demonstrate extensive knowledge on a subject matter, which they refine through continuous practice. They also exhibit an openness to the unknown, and to be questioned. They possess an emotional resilience to criticism, responsiveness in interactions, practice active listening, and show a commitment to developing self-confidence (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015).

These relationship-focused executives build greater commitment through symmetrical communication, which involves open dialogue between employees and the organisation. In this environment, employees feel seen, heard, valued, and included in decision-making (Lee & Kim, 2022; Kalogiannidis, 2020). It also increases their commitment to the organisation through belonging. These arguments also mirror the literature on inclusive cultures and are aligned with self-determination theory.

As a result, the environment created by relationship-focused executives enhances growth, performance, emotional attachment, and well-being (Lee & Kim, 2022). Saputra (2021) also mentions a causal relationship between self-confidence and effective communication. He argues that to enhance problem solving, the current times are calling for a leadership style that does not dominate decision making, that promotes discussion and critical thinking, and welcomes multiple perspectives and teamwork.

2.5.3.3. Stakeholder Communication

Effective leadership is a cornerstone of both organisational innovation and organisational success (Biggs, Johnston & Russell, 2024). 'One important, yet underemphasised component of effective leadership is executive communication' (Biggs *et al.*, 2024). Effective leadership communication conveys a clear purpose and intent and aligns employees, while the converse creates confusion. It can disenable employees in aligning their actions in a coordinated manner (Biggs *et al.*, 2024).

Kalogiannidis (2020) defines communication as the process of transmitting a message through various platforms to multiple stakeholders by using both verbal and non-verbal aspects.

In the age of digital media this becomes a more complex issue. It compels a review of the format and style of communication across the various platforms currently in use (Biggs *et al.*, 2024). Siano, Palazzo, Foroudi and Vollero (2017) reviewed Bernstein's communication wheel and enhanced it further. The original checklist considers the distinct types of stakeholders and the various vehicles of communication, and the enhanced version contains a modernised list of all possible stakeholders, the activities for which the communication is intended, and all the possible vessels for the communication.

The approach is intentional and calls for the more conscious use of various communication styles across diverse platforms to multiple audiences. Such an approach is useful, since inadequate communication can lead to significant financial losses for an organisation. As Rabiul *et al.* (2023:429) state, 'leadership is enacted through communication', and is inseparable from leadership itself and remains a central element, no matter the style it requires.

Communication is a strategic tool to influence followers. Rather than being an exchange of information, it should be considered as an exchange between a receiver and sender where messages are created, conveyed, selected, and interpreted in a way that shapes lives (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). It is a basic life process; a co-creation of understandings and outlooks. From an organisational perspective, it transcends simple leader-follower communication and encompasses all forms of communication within an organisation – how it is created, sustained, and how it evolves. Leadership is, 'a phenomenon that is co-constructed through communication connections established between leaders and followers' (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021:952).

The message originator communicates a message that triggers the recipient who responds through an activation bias that influences their personal experience of

the information. All of these elements result in mutual causality (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). It is in the response of the recipient of the message that leadership possibility is realised through resonance, activation or trigger, and a network of recipients becomes a 'self-generating, self-organising and self-sustaining system' with 'multiple feedback loops' (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021:950).

Communication needs to be well-articulated, structured and received in a way that creates emotional resonance and movement (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). Resonance can be achieved through repetition, consistency and contexts that reinforce the message and validate the recipient. The result is a co-created reality that takes on a life of its own (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Leadership resonance through communication influences followership more than desirable leadership behaviours do (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021).

2.5.3.4. Charismatic and transparent communication

Charismatic executive communication achieves resonance through its envisioning and energising nature, and creates change self-efficacy through employee enablement (Men *et al.*, 2020). By such, an employee holds the belief that they can navigate the foreseen change (Zainab, Akbar & Siddiqui, 2022). This internal change self-efficacy is validated through the celebration of success.

Change self-efficacy, however, needs to be sustained by the consistent and explicit communication and role modelling of the desired change mindset and behaviours (Saputra, 2021). This requires a blend of creative (artistic, right-brain) and analytical (scientific, left-brain) skills, enabling the audience not only to understand the organisation's operational and strategic direction, but also to embrace the journey with conviction (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015).

Leaders can positively impact employees' openness to change through charisma; 'charisma is values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signalling, which occurs via verbal and nonverbal communication' (Men *et al.*, 2020:6).

As noted by Men *et al.* (2020), persuasive communication by charismatic leaders results in employee openness to, support of, cooperation with, and positive

feelings towards the change. These aspects combine to mobilise resource availability in favour of the change, within a climate of organisational trust, 'a key indicator of social exchange relationships' (Men *et al.*, 2020:8). Commitment and trust are essential prerequisites to the successful adoption of organisational change (Zainab *et al.*, 2022).

The natural human response to change, whether desired or not, is resistance – it is viewed as a potential threat (Men *et al.*, 2020; Zainab *et al.*, 2022). As argued by Zainab *et al.* (2022), most change initiatives fail as a result of the mismanagement of the implementation phase, largely due to insufficient or incorrect internal communication.

Transparent internal communication mediates employee uncertainty in the implementation phase of change, and renders them more open to change (Zainab *et al.*, 2022). Zainab *et al.* (2022) describe transparent communication as participatory, sustainable, and accountable. In contrast, inadequate communication produces role ambiguity, burnout, and financial loss (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). 'Organisations with inadequate communication face stiff resistance from employees' (Zainab *et al.*, 2022:10).

Rabiul *et al.* (2023) argue that communication competency comprises of communication effectiveness and appropriateness – both of which can be evaluated through the consistent attainment of its aims, and through the avoidance of sanctions (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). Rabiul *et al.* (2023) conclude their study by recommending all leaders be trained on communication skills.

2.5.3.5. Relationship-oriented, task-oriented, and symmetrical communication

Effective communication within an organisation strengthens employees' relationship with the organisation. Indeed, communication is shaped by its leaders, especially the CEO, who sets the tone (Lee & Kim, 2022). Leadership styles influence the impact and appropriateness of the communication approach of the leader, while relationship-oriented styles are more effective at

communication than more task-orientated styles (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021; Rabiul *et al.*, 2023).

Some key differences distinguish task orientation from relationship orientation. Task orientation governs 'activity planning, member role clarification, operation monitoring and problem-solving' (Lee & Kim, 2022:262-263). Relationship orientation governs 'supporting, developing skills, recognising contributions and empowering members' (Lee & Kim, 2022:262-263). While task orientation serves the conveying of an organisation's goals and job performance, relationship orientation looks to enable employee performance and job satisfaction.

The role of communication should not be underestimated. Communication that is consistent, clear, and open, keeps staff engaged, productive and focused. In contrast, the lack thereof may increase role ambiguity, conflict, disengagement, and even burnout (Rabiul *et al.*, 2023). Both communication approaches are required, but relationship-focused executives seem to garner more commitment through symmetrical communication (Kalogiannidis, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2022).

Symmetrical internal communication is seen as a dialogue between employees and the organisation, where employees feel seen, heard, appreciated, and their competence recognises. They are part of decision making (Lee & Kim, 2022). This increases their commitment to the organisation through belonging. The literature on inclusive cultures mirrors these findings, and it is also in alignment with the Self-determination Theory. Symmetrical internal communication boosts growth, performance, emotional attachment, and well-being (Lee & Kim, 2022). The more openly communicative an environment is, the more it motivates an employee to share valuable ideas, information and suggestions to solve problems, which further accelerates innovation (Lee & Kim, 2022).

Lee and Kim (2022) highlight two key executive roles; that of the informational (or communicative), and an interpersonal (or relational) role. Both verbal and non-verbal behaviours associated with these roles shape an organisation's communication culture, and can either enable or hinder innovation.

2.5.3.6. *Executive public speaking*

Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) affirm that effective communication is essential for success, as it not only informs but also inspires stakeholders toward change. They note that this skill is rarely innate and is more often developed through practice and training. Before developing this skill, executives must first confront their fears, particularly the fear of public speaking, which Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) note is more common than the fear of death. This is often preceded by deeper fears of being judged or of failing to add value. Saputra (2021) notes a causal relationship between self-confidence and effective communication.

Once an executive overcomes their fear of public speaking, they need to be aware of how they speak; non-verbal communication accounts for 93% of the impact of their message with the message content accounting for only 7% (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015). Non-verbal aspects include spatial movement, body language and vocal qualities (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015).

Executive public speaking (Figure 9), according to Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015), is an under-researched area. It has three structural aspects, namely a short take-off phase seeking to attract attention and trust, the body of the communication that is concise and informative, and the landing phase that seeks to reinforce salient points.

Drawing on the ancient art of persuasion, Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) highlight the roles of Logos (clarity, logic, and purpose), Ethos (the speaker's credibility and resonance), and Pathos (emotional appeal and passion), all of which are essential for connecting with, and influencing an audience (Saputra, 2021). The traditional art of storytelling, anecdotes, visualisation, and metaphors, additionally support effective communication, coupled with the ability to be able to communicate complex ideas simply, and ensuring that what is said, aligns with the non-verbal aspects of communication (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015).

Saputra (2021) posits that the first requirement for organisational success is leadership, followed by communication, and then motivation. Communication is

an art, founded in a deep knowledge of the subject matter one is speaking on and practised over time. Practise brings with it an ability to improvise, self-confidence, an openness to the new and being questioned, a disconnection from criticism, responsiveness, and active listening (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015).

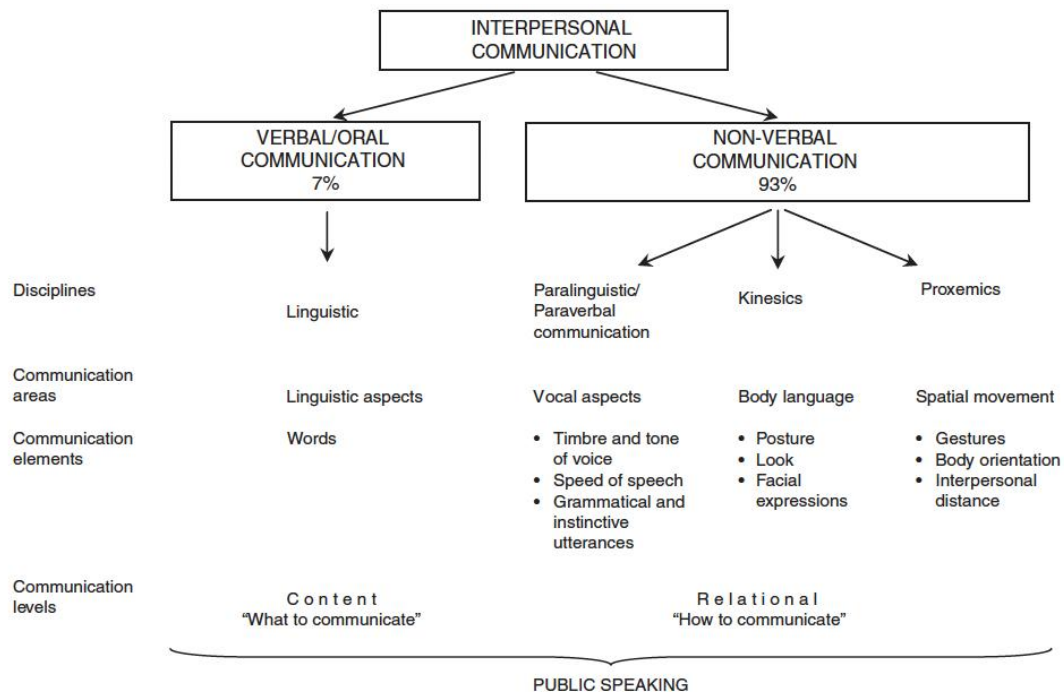


Figure 9: Interpersonal communication aspects of public speaking (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015)

2.5.3.7. Organisational communication

Saputra (2021) argues that leadership is the primary requirement of organisational success, followed by effective communication and motivation. Inclusive cultures are characterised by broad access to information. Kalogiannidis (2020) notes that horizontal communication, when it flows freely between departments, reduces uncertainty and enhances productivity by enabling the meaningful exchange of information, knowledge, and ideas. This results in greater collaboration and problem solving (Kalogiannidis, 2020) that are essential to innovation.

Kalogiannidis (2020) also introduces downward communication from a superior to a subordinate, and upward communication from a subordinate to a superior.

They highlight that being able to interact and share information freely with a superior, greatly impacts the ability of an employee to perform. Upward communication is generally used when employees request something different that triggers different choices and improves cooperation (Kalogiannidis, 2020).

Men *et al.* (2020) note that many academic articles focus on the leadership style needed for change, but there is a lack of emphasis on the significance of executive leadership communication in the change process. This is especially important given that it is not organisations, but the people within it, that change. Communication is the 'central, defining, and constitutive feature of leadership' (Men *et al.*, 2020:3). It is the process through which a leader connects with and influences their stakeholders, including installing culture through the communication of organisational purpose and values (Men *et al.*, 2020).

2.5.3.8. Relational skills and Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Relational leaders that communicate intentionally consider highly motivated employees as organisational currency. They set realistic but challenging goals, ensure that employees are safe to take risks, and are responsible and agile in their pursuit of a clear work plan (Saputra, 2021).

To enable this for an innovative and flexible workplace, leaders need to be strategic, change originators, confident and effective communicators, and role models (Men *et al.*, 2020). They need to be firm and responsible but respectful, compassionate, and inspirational. To motivate an employee to exert effort towards an organisational goal, leaders should show appreciation for efforts, achievements, and sacrifices (Saputra, 2021).

Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) identified a deficiency in EI as a barrier to effective communication. EI is the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others, thereby enabling more effective interpersonal engagements (Hendriani, 2020; Anand, Gorantla, Ranjan & Morcos, 2023). A deficiency of these EI characteristics limits a leader's ability to empathise by

seeing the world from stakeholders' perspectives and responding to their expectations.

When a leader lacks EI, they struggle to manage their own emotions, communicate effectively, connect empathetically with listeners and to engage stakeholders in a genuine harmonious manner where stakeholders feel valued (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015). Business excellence involves aligning business outputs with the distinct value sought by both external and internal stakeholders (Palumbo & Douglas, 2024). Lee and Kim (2022) concluded their research by recommending that executives be trained on relational and communication skills.

Key insights gained from the leadership communication and change literature pertinent to the study:

1. Leadership is enacted through communication, but remains under-researched.
2. Charismatic communication, which is envisioning, energising and enabling, supports change efficacy, but is mediated by trust, which develops through reciprocal risk-taking, integrity, competence, dependability, and benevolence.
3. Transparent, clear communication reduces uncertainty and resistance, and inadequate communication increases failure rates.
4. Symmetrical communication enhances belonging and innovation, and requires a relational orientation over a task-only focus. EI is a mediating factor that enables self-confidence.
5. Leadership resonance through communication is more influential than a leader's behaviour. Leadership is reconceptualised from a style, to a communicative process.

Communication operates as both mechanism and mediator of change that shapes resonance, trust, and innovative engagement. Effective communication requires

mastery of verbal, non-verbal and structural communication skills, active listening, EI, and overcoming the fear of public speaking.

Notwithstanding charismatic, transparent and clear communication, symmetrical communication is the most viable for change and innovation. It requires a mastery of relational skills, for which EI serves as a mediating factor and enabler of self-confidence. The following section will explore change, leadership, and relational skills.

2.5.4. Change, leadership, and Emotional Intelligence

Leading change in the current complex environment, requires Emotional Intelligence (EI), and strong communication and strategic leadership skills. The literature places particular emphasis on EI, focussing on empathy and self-validation as critical for creating adaptability, innovation, and effective communication.

In inclusive cultures, information flows freely. HR practices also align with inclusive values, making these organisations more change-ready and innovative. Inclusive leadership, a form of transformational leadership, is most effective when combined with strategic and entrepreneurial skills, and when leaders marginally challenge employees to enhance innovation and adaptability.

EI creates an environment that is conducive to effective communication and collaboration that enhances productivity and innovation, and is essential to effective leadership (Koutsoumpa, 2023). Leaders with high EI are more likely to adopt authentic (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017), transformational (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017; Hameli & Ordun, 2022), and servant leadership styles (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024).

Follower centricity mediates the relationship between emotionally intelligent leaders and adaptive employees, enabling them to respond to uncertainty more proactively and constructively (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). This, in turn, facilitates creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, stress management, and continuous learning.

The emotionally intelligent leader, having attained self-validation (self-worth), can focus more time and attention on the needs and development of employees, thereby creating greater trust and heightening authentic influence (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024).

Hendriani (2020) finds a causal relationship between the EI of individual team members and team performance. They argue that emotional regulation positively influences the cohesiveness of the group and knowledge sharing, which enhances performance and innovation (Hendriani, 2020). Malik (2022) promotes EI training and hiring to create a culture of knowledge sharing and to promote innovative work behaviour. The culture of a team influences its ability to regulate its emotions, and this may be a contextual determinant of a team's EI (Jamshed & Majeed, 2019).

2.5.4.1. Conceptualisation of EI

EI, a predictor of job performance, leadership success, health, and well-being (Anand *et al.*, 2023; Koutsoumpa, 2023) can be developed through training and coaching. It is also linked to authentic and transformational leadership (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017). EI is a concept that connects general intelligence and emotion, and is defined by Anand *et al.* (2023) as the capacity to 'perceive, understand, regulate, control and utilise emotions' (Anand *et al.*, 2023:1). Hendriani (2020) defines EI as a self-assessed ability; an inherent ability or skill that notes, reviews, and manages the emotions of others, groups, and oneself, for higher quality thinking and problem solving, and better relationships.

EI is consistently identified as a mediating capability that links leadership behaviour to innovation, adaptability, and performance (Koutsoumpa, 2023). However, conceptual divergence persists across models (Salovey-Mayer ability model; Bar-On mixed model; Goleman competency model), but this divergence raises measurement and operationalisation challenges. According to Hendriani (2020) and Anand *et al.* (2023), Mayer and Salovey define EI from an intellectual or cognitive perspective, whereas Goleman and Reuven Bar-On define EI more from the perspective of personality traits or aspects.

Schaap and Dippenaar (2017) and Anand *et al.* (2023) note that Goleman considers Emotional Intelligence to comprise five key components:

1. Self-awareness, or the ability to recognise one's own emotions and their impact on thoughts and behaviours;
2. Self-regulation, which involves managing impulsive urges and emotional reactions;
3. Social skills, referring to an awareness of power dynamics and the capacity to build trust, connect with others, and earn respect;
4. Empathy, which includes clear communication, conflict management, authentic responses, the ability to inspire, and a commitment to fairness; and
5. Motivation, defined as a positive focus on personal goals and aspirations.

Several studies, according to Schaap and Dippenaar (2017), support the relevance of Bar-On's mixed model of EI in developing effective leadership behaviours. This model considers five main aspects, namely intrapersonal and interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and overall mood.

Intrapersonal awareness involves the recognition of one's own strengths and weaknesses and communicating thoughts and feelings constructively, while interpersonal awareness involves understanding others' emotions and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017). Stress management governs one's ability to self-regulate emotions in trying situations (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017). Adaptability is to be fluid with external elements and to adjust oneself accordingly. Enhancing problem solving and general mood references one's ability to maintain a positive view on life and to self-motivate themselves (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017).

The intent of EI is to cultivate the skills that are needed to identify emotions, develop self-awareness, regulate one's responses, and engage effectively with

others (Koutsoumpa, 2023). Mayer and Salovey conceptualised EI as a component of social intelligence that governs the perception, expression, regulation, and utilisation of emotions (Hendriani, 2020). As part of their framework, they outline four stages in EI development (Anand *et al.*, 2023), namely perceiving and expressing emotions, distinguishing between categories of emotions, recognising emotional evolution and implications, and learning when to attach to-, or detach from emotions to act rationally.

The three most prominent conceptual models define EI slightly differently and use different measures. As stated by Anand *et al.* (2023) the Salovey-Mayer model defines EI as being able to help someone think clearly through the identification, perception, management, and utilisation of emotions. It is measured by an ability assessment. The Bar-On model is a spectrum of social and emotional capabilities, aids and competencies that impact behaviour and can be assessed through self-report, interview, and multi-rater assessments (Anand *et al.*, 2023). The Goleman model (Table 2) describes EI as a range of social abilities and emotional capabilities that facilitate enhanced performance, and is measured through a multi-rater assessment (Anand *et al.*, 2023).

Table 2: Goleman's emotional competence framework (Van der Merwe, Coetzee & De Beer, 2005)

PERSONAL COMPETENCE: HOW WE MANAGE OURSELVES

A. SELF-AWARENESS
A1. EMOTIONAL SELF-AWARENESS: READING ONE'S OWN EMOTIONS AND RECOGNISING THEIR IMPACT; USING 'GUT SENSE' TO GUIDE DECISIONS
A2. ACCURATE SELF-ASSESSMENT: KNOWING ONE'S STRENGTHS AND LIMITS
A3. SELF-CONFIDENCE: A SOUND SENSE OF ONE'S SELF-WORTH AND CAPABILITIES
B. SELF-MANAGEMENT/REGULATION
B1. EMOTIONAL SELF-CONTROL: KEEPING DISRUPTIVE EMOTIONS AND IMPULSES UNDER CONTROL
B2. TRUSTWORTHINESS: MAINTAINING STANDARDS OF HONESTY AND INTEGRITY
B3. CONSCIENTIOUSNESS: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR PERSONAL PERFORMANCE
B4. ADAPTABILITY: FLEXIBILITY IN ADAPTING TO CHANGING SITUATIONS OR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES
B5. INNOVATION: BEING COMFORTABLE WITH NOVEL IDEAS, APPROACHES AND NEW INFORMATION
C. MOTIVATION
C1. ACHIEVEMENT DRIVE: THE DRIVE TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE TO MEET STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE
C2. COMMITMENT: ALIGNING WITH THE GOALS OF THE GROUP OR THE ORGANISATION
C3. INITIATIVE: READINESS TO ACT ON OPPORTUNITIES
C4. OPTIMISM: PERSISTENCE IN PURSUING GOALS DESPITE OBSTACLES AND SETBACKS
SOCIAL COMPETENCE: HOW WELL WE HANDLE RELATIONSHIPS
D. EMPATHY
D1. UNDERSTANDING OTHERS: SENSING OTHERS' FEELINGS AND PERSPECTIVES, AND TAKING AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN THEIR CONCERNS
D2. DEVELOPING OTHERS: SENSING OTHERS' DEVELOPMENT NEEDS, AND BOLSTERING THEIR ABILITIES
D3. SERVICE ORIENTATION: ANTICIPATING, RECOGNISING AND MEETING CUSTOMER NEEDS
D4. LEVERAGING DIVERSITY: CULTIVATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH DIFFERENT KINDS OF PEOPLE
D5. POLITICAL AWARENESS: READING A GROUP'S EMOTIONAL CURRENTS AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS
E. SOCIAL SKILLS/RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT
E1. INFLUENCE: WIELDING A RANGE OF TACTICS FOR PERSUASION
E2. COMMUNICATION: LISTENING OPENLY, AND SENDING CONVINCING MESSAGES
E3. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: NEGOTIATING AND RESOLVING DISAGREEMENTS
E4. LEADERSHIP: INSPIRING AND GUIDING INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS
E5. CHANGE CATALYST: INITIATING AND MANAGING CHANGE
E6. BUILDING BONDS: NURTURING INSTRUMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS
E7. COLLABORATION AND COOPERATION: WORKING WITH OTHERS TOWARDS SHARED GOALS
E8. TEAMWORK CAPABILITIES: CREATING GROUP SYNERGY IN PURSUING COLLECTIVE GOALS

Koutsoumpa (2023) summarises EI as the capacity to recognise, comprehend, and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. This ability – essential to effective leadership – contributes to an environment that supports effective communication and collaboration, and enhances productivity and innovation.

Koutsoumpa (2023) concluded a meta-analysis of academic literature, finding that higher EI extends to additional benefits such as better-quality decision making, conflict resolution, adaptability to change, team management, and job satisfaction. These findings concur with the increasing importance of companies incorporating EI training and coaching.

2.5.4.2. Relational leadership, and EI mediated by empathy

According to Čikeš and Humer (2023) it is more critical as to how a leader assesses their own EI rather than their actual EI level or ability. Individuals who perceive themselves as effective in solving emotional challenges are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour, which suggests a greater interest in, and sensitivity toward emotional issues (Babić Čikeš & Tomašić Humer, 2023), as opposed to someone who has a high tested EI, but little inclination towards the resolution of emotional challenges.

EI itself does not necessarily determine prosocial behaviour; it is mediated by cognitive and emotional empathy and morality (Babić Čikeš & Tomašić Humer, 2023). Prosocial behaviours reflect an awareness of others' needs and a willingness to offer support. Such behaviours are not only associated with success but are also crucial for addressing complex challenges. These behaviours include 'sharing, helping, confronting and cooperating' (Babić Čikeš & Tomašić Humer, 2023:965).

According to Koutsoumpa (2023), the greater a leader's degree of EI, the stronger their ability would be to inspire and influence colleagues and followers by understanding situations from others' viewpoints, thereby increasing trust and cooperation within the environment. Similarly, Acosta-Prado, Zárate-Torres, Tafur-Mendoza, Prada-Ospina and Sarmiento (2023) argue that there is a positive and direct relationship between EI and leadership practises for goal attainment.

EI drives team performance, with effective communication acting as a key medium for its influence. As Hendriani (2020:283) notes, '(EI) is attributed to every performance point in the workplace,' and considers four aspects to team

performance: the degree of cohesiveness present, the clarity of roles and commitment of each member towards the team and its goals, the vehicles of communication within it and the quality of the knowledge shared, and the degree of consensus towards goal attainment.

As EI contributes significantly to effective leadership, Acosta-Prado *et al.* (2023) argue that individuals with high EI should either be identified and selected for leadership positions, or trained to develop their EI. EI mediates the relationship between leadership and goal attainment, serving as both a transmission mechanism and a predictor of personal and professional success.

Of the abilities required for superior performance, EI accounts for over two-thirds of the aspects, and is twice as important as intellectual intelligence (Malik, 2022). EI is one of the most critical influencers of organisational behaviour and refers to the ability to process emotional information in order to evaluate, regulate, and adapt emotions contextually, thereby contributing to adaptability (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024).

An emotionally intelligent leader can identify which emotions influence performance, leveraging this knowledge to not only motivate but also educate employees (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Their high EI makes them more inclined to adopt a relational follower centric leadership style, which enables adaptive employees to respond more proactively and constructively to change. At the same time, it enhances problem-solving, collaboration, stress management, and continuous learning (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024; Hameli & Ordun, 2022). This leadership approach is underpinned by self-validation, which allows leaders to focus more time and attention on employee development and building trust (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024).

Empirical findings demonstrate EI's positive influence on knowledge sharing, team cohesion, adaptive capacity, and innovative work behaviour (Hendriani, 2020; Malik, 2022; Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Yet, EI does not automatically produce prosocial outcomes; it is mediated by empathy and moral orientation

(Babić Čikeš & Tomašić Humer, 2023). Thus, EI must be situated within ethical and relational leadership frameworks. Inclusive leadership is both relational and ethical, given its focus on belonging and uniqueness, and incorporating equity (Korkmaz, 2022).

2.5.4.3. Leadership EI as a mediator of team EI

EI can shift a challenge into an opportunity, direct energy towards a goal, stimulate creativity and ease conflict, and create the right environment to thrive and innovate (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). The ability to listen to, and appreciate the views of another, aids the collaboration that is essential to innovation. Self-awareness on the other hand, enables one to be aware of their impact on another (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Hendriani (2020) confirms that the team leader's EI and mood greatly impact the emotional level and creativity of the team.

Leaders who role model EI can influence social interactions in the workplace and are perceived to be more effective communicators (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Emotional regulation positively influences group cohesiveness and knowledge sharing, which in turn enables performance and innovation (Hendriani, 2020). Jamshed and Majeed's (2019) study found a direct relationship between team performance and team culture, demonstrating that culture plays a key role in shaping emotional regulation. They consider cultural elements to be that of vision, psychological safety, clarity of tasks, and innovation readiness.

Jamshed and Majeed (2019) additionally note the mediating effect of a team's EI and knowledge sharing on team performance. Malik's (2022) study concluded that both EI and the tacit sharing of knowledge positively impact innovative work behaviour in the workplace – a key competitive advantage – and that EI and innovative work behaviour were mediated partially through the explicit sharing of knowledge.

Employees who are emotionally intelligent engage actively in the promotion of innovative work behaviour by means of the explicit sharing of information. Hendriani (2020) supports this and finds a causal relationship between individual

team member EI and team performance, and more acutely, in heterogeneous groups.

Malik (2022) promotes EI hiring and training to create a culture where knowledge is shared, and innovative work behaviour promoted. The performance and innovation output of teams, a crucial competitive advantage, is better when rich, high quality diverse information is exchanged. It necessitates a participative or inclusive culture where team members show mutual respect, care, and support (Jamshed & Majeed, 2019).

Malik (2022) references pride and empathy as the aspects of EI that promote tacit knowledge sharing. These aspects represent up to 95% of an organisation's knowledge. Tacit knowledge refers to the abilities, experience, learned skills, undocumented processes, and gut feelings of employees (Malik, 2022:654). It differs from explicit knowledge, which is more visible, codified, and easily shared within the organisation. Those employees who seek to share their tacit knowledge are more active in the aspects of innovating, inspiring, ideating and creating the new (Malik, 2022). The outcomes of these are the promotion, generation and execution of new ideas, technologies, products, services, and methods (Malik, 2022).

A team's collective EI is enhanced through team member EI and requires a clear set of team values or principles that support task coherence towards the team vision. It also promotes trust, respect, empowerment, participation, and cooperation that enhance knowledge sharing and innovation (Jamshed & Majeed, 2019). The EI or capacity to leverage the emotions of a team member is positively and meaningfully correlated to their self-assurance, self-discipline, goal achievement and industriousness (Hameli & Ordun, 2022).

Employee self-assuredness focuses on three aspects, namely a desire to initiate action, to exert effort to complete a task, and to persist during adversity (Hameli & Ordun, 2022). This self-efficacy, a key aspect of change competence, is developed through self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-regulation, and

is underscored by Social Cognitive Theory in which EI plays a significant role (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). The outer world of an employee observed through their output and performance reflects their inner world (Hameli & Ordun, 2022). Adaptive capacity is defined as 'the ability to react quickly and intelligently to change' (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024:19).

Hendriani (2020), highlights adaptivity as a key cultural aspect that is essential for dynamic environments comprised of shifting customer and environmental demands. It is positively linked to EI as a key resource for enabling employee adaptability and self-efficacy (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Self-efficacy reflects an employee's self-confidence, which is a more specific, well-developed, and positively oriented evaluation of the self, compared to self-esteem (Hameli & Ordun, 2022). A belief in one's personal success across various circumstances is a key aspect of behavioural change (Hameli & Ordun, 2022).

Leaders with high EI can enhance employee self-efficacy in task performance through the enhancement of their EI, which in turn, boosts organisational commitment (Hameli & Ordun, 2022). Jamshed and Majeed's (2019) study is the first arguing that culture can be decentralised to a team, and that the performance of that team is a synthesis of both structural and behavioural aspects. The more self-assured an employee is, the more committed they are to an organisation (Hameli & Ordun, 2022).

According to Hameli and Ordun (2022), there are three aspects of commitment. It comprises of an employee's emotional connection and sense of identification with an organisation, the cost to the employee of leaving, and a sense of commitment or loyalty to the organisation. The higher an employee's EI, the stronger would be the level of their motivation, job fulfilment, performance, adaptability, and self-efficacy, which also mediate the relationship between team cohesiveness and EI (Hameli & Ordun, 2022). These employees experience increased levels of self-motivation and empathy, are more resourceful, can easily move through distress, and channel their energy towards the pursuit of new products, services and technologies (Malik, 2022).

'(EI) is proving to be the most critical component for higher performance' (Hameli & Ordun, 2022:75) and key to change, adaptability and problem solving.

Key insights gained from the change, leadership and Emotional Intelligence literature pertinent to the study:

1. EI predicts leadership success and adaptability. However, measurement models vary conceptually, raising measurement and operationalisation challenges.
2. EI strengthens team adaptability, commitment, and change self-efficacy.
3. EI enhances knowledge sharing, team cohesion, and innovation, but it is not deterministic without prosocial behaviour mediated by empathy and morality.
4. EI must be situated within ethical and relational leadership frameworks. Inclusive leadership is both, and is also the style that is most conducive to innovative work behaviour
5. Self-validation, a precursor to self-acceptance and an enabler of self-inclusion, is a key component of leadership EI in the context of change and innovation.
6. EI must be cultivated intentionally through personal development, training, mentoring, or coaching.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) serves as a central mediating mechanism for performance, adaptability, commitment, change self-efficacy, team cohesion, knowledge sharing, and innovation. Empathy and morality are identified as key indicators of its efficacy. Empathy and morality are situated within ethical and relational frameworks such as inclusive leadership. Self-validation, a precursor to self-acceptance and self-inclusion, emerges as a pivotal intrapersonal mediator, foregrounding the psychological preconditions of inclusive leadership.

Inclusive organisational brand leadership proves most suited to high-change, innovation-intensive environments. It integrates authentic, servant, ethical, and responsible elements to support internal brand building and aligned cultures. It requires strategic skills like charismatic communication, recalibrated for cultural inclusivity and collective sensemaking, alongside EI competencies to generate clarity, enthusiasm, and psychological safety during change. Strategic visionary leaders excel in rallying brand purpose. However, in empowering distributed agency, inclusive organisational brand leadership is better suited.

Empathy, morality, and self-validation, transmitted via verbal and nonverbal channels underpin these dynamics, yet tensions persist between relational inclusion and performance-focused challenges. Optimal inclusive organisational brand leadership thus requires a calibrated synthesis of inclusive, transformational, entrepreneurial, and transactional practices that are supported by feedback loops, trust, role modelling and self-inclusion to link EI, psychological safety, and innovation outcomes.

A participative, and adaptable culture, supported by inclusive leadership and systemic brand-aligned human resource practices, best nurtures innovative work behaviour. However, the literature reveals a fragmented foundation, with limited examination of self-inclusion's temporal development and its role as a mediator in inclusive organisational brand leadership. This presents conceptual opportunities for future inquiry into intrapersonal and organisational support mechanisms.

The following section will identify shortcomings that emerged from the reviewed literature, particularly as it relates to enabling factors and support mechanisms that are essential for cultivating innovation and change. However, the gaps identified are not reflective of the complete body of knowledge.

2.6. GAPS IDENTIFIED IN EXISTING LITERATURE

While prior studies affirm the efficacy of inclusive approaches, they often overlook the nuanced dynamics that are required to operationalise them effectively. Existing literature tends to emphasise the environmental experience of inclusion

and its benefits, rather than focusing on the role of the leader in cultivating and sustaining inclusion, both intrinsically and extrinsically. Further research could explore the factors that enable inclusion in leadership practices across various industries and organisational structures and providing better support for leaders as they transition to inclusive organisational brand leadership.

2.6.1. Literature gaps on inclusion mediation

Conventional research predominantly celebrates the outcomes of inclusive leadership such as heightened innovation and adaptability, yet neglects the intrinsic and extrinsic mediators that enable leaders to cultivate inclusion authentically. For instance, although inclusive cultures are lauded for promoting psychological safety and extra-role behaviours, scant attention is paid to what facilitates leaders' own transitions toward inclusivity, especially amid contextual variances across industries or organisational scales.

This oversight contrasts with the literature's emphasis on environmental enablers (e.g., human resource practices). It creates a gap in understanding leader-centric mechanisms such as empathy, morality, trust, self-validation and self-inclusion that underpin the emotional agility needed to bridge theory and practice.

Inclusive organisational brand leadership further demands strategic competencies, including charismatic communication, feedback loops, and the ability to role-model innovation while constructively challenging employee performance.

As a result, conventional leadership development programmes remain generic and ill-equipped to cultivate optimal inclusive brand leadership attuned to innovation imperatives. Moreover, the literature portrays optimal inclusive organisational brand leadership as a calibrated synthesis of inclusive, transformational, entrepreneurial, and transactional practices that are mediated by relational and practical skills. This synthesis necessitates a reconceptualisation of inclusive brand leadership, particularly regarding its optimised suitability for innovation and change.

2.6.2. Gaps in leadership transitions

The literature affirms transformational and inclusive styles for change navigation, but the friction leaders face when shifting from transactional or authoritarian paradigms are under-explored. This reveals a bias toward idealised endpoints over processes. Studies highlight inclusive leadership's superiority in driving change-oriented citizenship behaviours, yet they fail to dissect transition barriers such as cognitive dissonance or entrenched power dynamics that contrast with evidence on psychological empowerment's mediating role elsewhere. This discrepancy hampers practical guidance, particularly for organisational brand leaders who must align inclusive practices with innovation-driven brand promises. It exposes a critical shortfall in actionable frameworks.

These gaps underscore the need for this study to create an integrative model that illuminates enabling factors (e.g., self-inclusion, relational trust) and support mechanisms (e.g., targeted coaching), directly addressing how inclusive organisational brand leadership optimally emerges to fuel innovation and change. By contrast, existing work risks perpetuating superficial applications, diluting its relevance in volatile brand contexts. The following section will review the key considerations from the literature.

2.7. KEY INSIGHTS GAINED FROM THE LITERATURE

1. The literature affirms that effective organisational brand leadership is central to organisational success and internal brand building. Leadership theory underpins internal brand building by facilitating employee engagement and translating brand commitments into tangible behavioural outcomes. However, while this connection is well established, the mediating processes that link leadership intention to brand-aligned employee behaviour require deeper interrogation.
2. Contemporary leadership discourse increasingly emphasises the need to integrate creativity as a defining leadership capability. Creativity, a component of innovation, is positioned not merely as an individual trait

but also as a leadership-enabled condition that empowers employees to generate value in dynamic environments. Psychological empowerment has been shown to positively influence innovative work behaviour that is conceptualised as an outcome of brand citizenship. Yet empowerment itself is rarely examined as a construct that must first be cultivated within leaders before it can be transmitted organisationally.

3. A range of leadership approaches, including transformational, entrepreneurial, servant, ethical, transactional, responsible, strategic, and inclusive leadership, are associated with internal brand building, creativity, and innovative work behaviour. While this plurality reflects theoretical richness, it also reveals conceptual fragmentation. The coexistence of multiple leadership paradigms raises questions regarding integration; how do these styles intersect, and which mediators determine their effectiveness in different contexts?
4. Psychological safety and psychological empowerment consistently emerge as essential mediators of extra-role behaviour and brand citizenship. Nevertheless, their positioning as mediators often assumes linear causality from leadership behaviour to employee outcome, overlooking the reciprocal and systemic influences that shape these dynamics.
5. Inclusive leadership is identified as particularly potent in enhancing innovation by fostering growth mindset, knowledge exchange, agility, collaboration, and empowerment. It influences innovation through belonging, psychological safety, idea sharing, and trust. Inclusive leaders are characterised by openness, accessibility, respect, dialogue, feedback, and accountability. However, the literature insufficiently explores the antecedent conditions that enable leaders to embody these characteristics authentically rather than performatively.
6. The concept of self-inclusion emerges as a potentially significant mediator of inclusion in leaders, suggesting that leaders' internal

integration may shape cultures conducive to stakeholder-centric innovation. Yet empirical exploration of self-inclusion as a mediating construct remains limited.

7. Human resource practices are recognised as instrumental in shaping cultures that enhance brand citizenship behaviour. Cultures that encourage experimentation and idea generation are more likely to drive innovation. Inclusive cultures promote learning, diversity of thought, and equality. Despite this, the interaction between HR systems and leadership identity development is not adequately theorised, leaving a gap in understanding how structural and psychological enablers interact.
8. Change leadership is consistently associated with sustainable competitiveness through experimentation, leadership sponsorship, and cultures of learning. Strategic leadership further contributes through vision articulation and change direction. However, the literature often treats vision communication as sufficient, without examining whether leaders possess the Emotional Intelligence (EI) required to build stakeholder trust during uncertainty.
9. Stakeholder trust, cultivated through charismatic communication that envisions, energises, and enables, is essential in complex environments. Trust is underpinned by integrity, dependability, competence, and benevolence. While EI is acknowledged as foundational to trust-building, its role as a mediating capability in inclusive organisational brand leadership remains insufficiently elaborated.

Collectively, these insights reveal strong consensus regarding desirable outcomes, but are comparatively limited in conceptual clarity regarding the enabling factors and support mechanisms that facilitate the emergence of inclusive organisational brand leadership optimal for innovation and change. This informs the key considerations guiding data collection.

2.7.1 Key considerations for data collection

1. What intrinsic mediators (e.g., empathy, self-inclusion, emotional agility) enable leaders to cultivate authentic inclusive practices? What influenced the cultivation of these intrinsic mediators? What beliefs and values sustain authentic inclusive practices?
2. How do extrinsic factors (e.g., relational trust, feedback loops) support leaders' shifts from transactional to inclusive styles? What influenced the cultivation of these extrinsic factors? What behaviours and skills sustain authentic inclusive practices?

2.8. CONCLUSION

The literature establishes the integral connection between leadership theory, internal brand building, brand citizenship, adaptability to change, and innovative work behaviour incorporating creativity. It affirms that contemporary leadership must evolve beyond traditional paradigms to integrate innovation, creativity, inclusivity and psychological empowerment.

The literature establishes inclusive organisational brand leadership as critical for enabling innovation, creativity, psychological safety, and brand citizenship behaviours. An array of paradigms – transformational, entrepreneurial, ethical, and inclusive – demonstrate their collective capability in driving extra-role behaviours, employee empowerment, and adaptability amid change. Yet, this theoretical abundance masks profound gaps; an emphasis on environmental enablers (e.g., HR practices) and outcomes emerge at the expense of leader-centric mediators such as empathy, self-inclusion, relational trust, and emotional agility, which enable authentic transitions from transactional paradigms to inclusive practices.

Conventional studies celebrate the benefits of inclusivity such as growth mindsets, knowledge exchange, and stakeholder trust, while aspects such as the intrinsic frictions of leadership emergence and the need for strategic competencies like charismatic communication and innovation role-modelling

remain under investigated. Psychological empowerment and safety appear recurrently as mediators, but their reciprocal, leader-first cultivation remains relatively unknown, as does the synthesis of multiple leadership styles into a calibrated framework optimised for evolving brand contexts. Self-inclusion, in particular, emerges as an underexamined antecedent, with the potential to bridge leaders' internal integration with organisational innovation.

These shortcomings exposes opportunities in existing leadership development towards innovation imperatives that opens up applications towards actionable pathways. This study addresses this void by seeking to create an integrative model that activates enabling factors and supports mechanisms towards inclusive organisational brand leadership by fuelling innovation and change. In doing so, it aims to reconceptualise inclusive leadership as a dynamic, mediated process, offering practical frameworks for leaders who are navigating brand-aligned transformation.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature, inclusive leadership stands out as the style best suited to enhancing innovation through a growth mindset, knowledge, agility, collaboration, and empowerment (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024) and thus most capable of enabling stakeholder-centric innovation. However, the literature inadequately establishes what specifically enables the development of inclusion in an organisational brand leader nor the additional behaviours and skills required (Figure 6). Further research is required to support organisational brand leaders to cultivate inclusive organisational brand leadership (Shore *et al.*, 2018), and to inform the development of behaviours and skills that support inclusive leadership (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). Organisational brand leaders require guidelines to cultivate inclusive organisational brand leadership capable of enabling innovation suited for complex and uncertain times.

The primary research goal is to explore what inclusive organisational brand leadership is. The secondary research goal is to explore what enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader.

3.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This is an exploratory study whereby the researcher aimed to better understand the journey to inclusive organisational brand leadership and develop new theory (Babbie, 2014). The study adopted a constructivist epistemological position, which posits that knowledge is subjective and socially constructed (Boeije, 2010, Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). The researcher was interested in how knowledge is constructed, what account the participants gave of inclusion, how they arrived at that account, and their journey to inclusion (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). This study sought to generate theory and is therefore not postpositivist with respect to verifying theory, nor transformative in terms of a change-orientation, nor pragmatic with its focus on a real-world practice (Creswell

& Creswell, 2018). The researcher intended to understand the intricacies of the meaning leaders have uniquely associated with their journey to inclusion, through their own lens and specific contexts, and histories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative research methods are more objective and seek to quantify relationships, test hypotheses, examine causal links, or identify patterns through statistical analysis (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kelle, Kühberger & Bernhard, 2019). In contrast, qualitative research methods are more subjective and seek to explore or understand a phenomenon through non-numerical means. The intent is to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences surrounding a phenomenon and understand the contexts and meanings associated with the lived experience (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As this study sought to explore the social phenomenon of inclusive organisational brand leadership and provide deeper insights into what enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader, it is a qualitative study.

A qualitative research design and data collection method was selected as this study looked to the subjective lived meanings and experiences of the participants' unique journeys to adopting inclusion (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). A qualitative study looks to analyse text to understand meaning through open-ended questions and not statistical analysis through close-ended questions (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher sought to explore the context and depth of each participant's journey to inclusion through their lens and perspective within the context of executive leadership, rather than to test a theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The exploration and explanation of a social phenomenon lends itself to an inductive qualitative research process that strives to develop theory through observations, as opposed to a more deductive quantitative research process that intends to test a hypothesis (Boeije, 2010, Babbie, 2014).

Whilst qualitative research offers more flexibility and richer, more detailed insights into the human experience, a disadvantage is that the data is analysed through the lens of the researcher (Bless *et al.*, 2013). As a result, qualitative text analysis can be subjective and influenced by researcher bias, unlike the more objective

nature of quantitative data analysis (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Kelle *et al.*, 2019), and results may not be easy to generalise given the smaller sample sizes. Conversely, while quantitative research provides data that is more objective and capable of being generalised to larger populations, it is restrictive in nature and cannot explore the depth of the human experience (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Kelle *et al.*, 2019). This study was best suited to a qualitative research methodology as it sought to explore the human experience of inclusion in organisational brand leadership.

To explore the phenomenon of inclusive organisational brand leadership, Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) was employed, a qualitative methodology that emphasises the co-creation of meaning between the participants and the researcher. 'Grounded theory is mostly used to study human behaviour by way of comparative analysis' (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021:208). 'Grounded theory originated from the collaboration of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss... (bringing together) positivism and interactionism' (Babbie, 2014:308). The researcher derived theory from themes, patterns, and categories, with the data obtained through the comparative analysis of multiple viewpoints (Babbie, 2014). The nature of a comparative analysis allows for flexibility as observations unfold (Babbie, 2014).

Alternative qualitative methods would not adequately capture the journey to inclusive leadership from multiple perspectives. For example, narrative research focuses on eliciting life stories from one or a few participants, limiting its ability to generate broader theoretical insights. Phenomenological research emphasises the essence of lived experiences, however it does not move beyond description to theory-building. Ethnography is valuable in uncovering cultural patterns over time, but is most suited to studying groups rather than theorising leadership processes across contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In comparison, grounded theory offers a systematic, iterative approach that allows theory to emerge directly from participants' perspectives, making it better suited to the objectives of this study.

The researcher was looking to derive a theory through the views of the participants through a reiterative data collection and analysis process (Stake, 2005; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The existing literature inadequately establishes what enables the development of inclusion in a leader, as well as what behaviours and skills support inclusive leadership. What emerged from the data collection and the reiterative nature of the data analysis, was grounded theory (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021) or theory from the ground up (Babbie, 2014). The theory inductively resulted from the reiterative data analysis and integration of categories (Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). The advantage of CGT is the depth of the contextual understanding obtained, its ability to inductively generate theory as opposed to describe a social phenomenon through ethnography (Boeije, 2010). The disadvantage is that the data analysis is complex and can be subjective.

The grounded theory approach was inductive in nature, aiming to develop a theory grounded in data collected from semi-structured interviews (Boeije, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 national finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award in South Africa, as vetted and issued by Business Engage Non-Profit Company (NPC) over the past four years (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). The interviews were guided by clearly defined research objectives to ensure that the data collected explored the study's key questions. Business Engage is a non-profit organisation that operates across Southern African and is focused on inclusive growth through inclusive diversity. The data generated was systematically analysed and theory developed which was expanded, confirmed, and deepened through a comparative analysis as the interviews progressed (Boeije, 2010). The emergent theory was 'derived from and supported by, and therefore grounded in, the collected data' (Boeije, 2010:8).

There is no other known award of this nature in Southern Africa. The closest alternative is the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Champion Award, presented annually at the Future of Leadership Award Ceremony hosted by the Future Leader Forum. However, the judging process employed by the Future Leader Forum is not as rigorous as that of Business Engage NPC.

The Future Leader Forum simply asks judges to read a short paragraph explaining why a candidate was nominated and then select the nominee they feel is most deserving from several candidates in various categories, based solely on the information provided in the paragraph, without any additional validation. In many cases, the data provided is incomplete, and in some instances, there is only one nominee to choose from in a sector.

In contrast, Business Engage NPC require all nominations to be submitted with supporting documentation. Short-listed nominations are independently reviewed and scored by a panel of industry experts: all scores are added to calculate the top scoring nominees who are then interviewed by a panel of judges who confer and select the top five nominees per category. The highest scoring nominees across all categories are recognised at the annual Gender Mainstreaming Awards (GMA). As an illustration of the vetting process, of the 190 nominations received for the 2024 awards ceremony, only 24 were selected as finalists and shortlisted for judging.

Nominees for the Inclusive Leader Award are evaluated on the following criteria:

1. **Impactful actions:** evidence of specific initiatives that have measurably advanced broader inclusion such as increased diversity in leadership or improved business metrics.
2. **Strategic vision:** demonstration of embedding inclusion as a business or organisational strategy.
3. **Resilience and influence:** proof of overcoming challenges, such as scepticism or structural barriers, to champion inclusion and inspire others through leadership by example.
4. **Multiplier effect:** examples of empowering others, such as mentoring leaders, fostering diverse teams, or influencing policy, that creates lasting and scalable impact.
5. **Alignment with purpose:** a clear connection to a purpose-driven mission and a commitment to sustainable change.

The judging panel comprises approximately 70 prominent leaders from across Southern African. The judging process is comprehensive and independent of Business Engage NPC. The Inclusive Leader finalists must demonstrate that their work reflects the belief that inclusion is not merely a matter of compliance, but serves as a catalyst for innovation, profitability and social good. Whether leading a multinational organisation, a startup, or a community initiative, they inspire others by embodying the principle that leadership is about empowering others while developing one's own role.

Each judge on the panel uses the scorecard presented on the following page (Table 3) to evaluate each finalist for the Inclusive Leader Award.

Table 3: Inclusive Leader Award finalist scorecard

Aspects Adjudicated Upon	Weighting	Indicator
Level of seniority	20	Recognition of the level that the nominee operates at in their business dealings.
Extent of influence	20	Acknowledgement of the length and breadth of their sphere of influence.
Type of environment	30	What is the sector that the nominee is working in and what is the perceived level of difficulty regarding the advancement of women in that sector.
Broadness of communities affected	20	Is the nominee a leader of statue outside of his or her working environment.
Other redeeming qualities	10	Any other information that shows the nominee in a positive light.

3.3. RESEARCH PLAN

The researcher aimed to better understand what facilitated the emergence of inclusion in an organisational brand leader as well as what behaviours and skills supported inclusive leadership.

After a thorough exploration of methodological options, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the inclusive organisational brand leaders vetted and recognised by Business Engage NPC. A semi-structured interview discussion guide was created (Appendix A). Questions were posed to research participants

and answered through their own perspectives, allowing the researcher to interpret meaning from their experiences and behaviours (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1998). This interpretive approach is consistent with the theoretical foundations of grounded theory, where human reality is created through 'interpretation and dialogical processes' (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1998:60), and a framework emerges from the ground up through participants' accounts rather than being predetermined.

The data obtained from the 23 participants was contrasted and compared (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). The researcher generated an interpretative theory from the comparison that captured the subjective experiences and meanings associated with each leader's journey to inclusive organisational brand leadership (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). This approach allowed the researcher to uncover the complex and nuanced ways in which inclusive organisational brand leaders perceive and interact with the concept of inclusion in their leadership roles, providing a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomenon.

Through the semi-structured interviews, the researcher aimed to answer the below research questions:

3.3.1. What is inclusive organisational brand leadership?

3.3.2. What enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader?

3.4. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The population consisted of nominees for the Inclusive Leader Award in Southern Africa, averaging 60 per year (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). The sampling frame comprised the vetted award finalists, an average of five annually, as determined by Business Engage NPC (Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). The researcher sought to interview inclusive leaders and therefore only included these vetted finalists.

Accordingly, the sampling frame represented the total sample available for the researcher to interview, and the researcher is confident that the sample is precise (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Additionally, the researcher is certain that the scope

and location of the sample are appropriate for addressing the research purpose and questions (Boeije, 2010). To minimise coverage errors associated with this approach, finalists from the past four years were interviewed (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020), as data prior to this timeframe may lack relevance given the complexity of the current leadership climate. The interviewed finalists represented the unit of analysis and the sampling population (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). This comprehensive sampling approach ensured the reliability of the findings by incorporating both breadth and depth.

The Inclusive Leader, according to Business Engage, is a male or female leader actively sponsoring others to move up the ranks of business leadership. Ingrained in this leader is a recognition of the value of diversity in business. The leader is nominated by a person or group of people, who submit a nomination in writing to Business Engage, along with evidence substantiating their claim. The evidence is peer reviewed by a panel of judges, prominent business leaders across Southern Africa, and then each nominee is interviewed before the judges agree unanimously on the award winners.

The research participants are all senior organisational brand leaders from small to medium size enterprises to large blue-chip organisations, which added a much-needed richness to the data obtained, ensuring that the study is of value to a wide audience. The researcher secured access to the Inclusive Leader finalists as she is the NPCs representative in KwaZulu-Natal. Therefore, this sample technique fell under non-probability sampling as the participants had no probability attached to being selected (Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Non-probability sampling is a method in which the likelihood of selecting a specific individual is unknown, typically because the total population size is either unknown or cannot be determined (Hartshorne & Schachner, 2018; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). In this study, the researcher lacked access to a comprehensive list of nominees and was therefore unable to guarantee that each nominee had an equal chance of selection, as required in probability-based sampling (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

The type of non-probability sampling that was utilised was purposive, as participants were selected based on their relevance to the research question, specifically their roles as inclusive leaders (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

In other words, the sample selection was purposeful in relation the research aims and queries (Boeije, 2010; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is called judgement sampling as the participants were selected based on their attainment of inclusion in their leadership style (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). While the data cannot be generalised across leadership, it can be generalised across inclusive leadership, given the nature of the vetting process and sample applied (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). The sample was theoretical and purposive, as the researcher aimed to develop theory grounded in the data until saturation was reached (Boeije, 2010). Saturation was deemed to have been reached once no new patterns and themes were noted in new interview data (Boeije, 2010). The sample was then deemed to be adequate (Bless *et al.*, 2013).

3.5. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Semi-structured interview discussion guides were developed to collect qualitative data from the participants, with the intent of eliciting in-depth responses regarding the research problem (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). An interview is a form of conversation whereby the interviewer or researcher poses questions to the interviewee or participant in relation to the area of study (Boeije, 2010). The interview structure was neither conversational nor standardised, but it explored certain themes through pre-determined questions, allowing for some flexibility with unstructured probing or clarifying questions (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). A structured interview predetermines the nature and content of the questions to be asked, as well as their sequence and the response options (Boeije, 2010). A semi-structured interview maintains a balance between predetermined questions and open-ended inquiry, offering both flexibility and depth while maintaining a clear focus on the interview objectives (Boeije, 2010).

Semi-structured interviews are valuable in exploratory research, as they allow the researcher to seek plausible answers, while also generating in-depth, high-quality data (Bless *et al.*, 2013). In-person interviews are preferable as they allow for the observation of more subtle non-verbal communication. Video conferencing serves as a secondary option. While not as personal as a face-to-face interview, it is more engaging than a telephone call and enables a greater rapport, yielding richer data (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Conversely, the primary disadvantage is that the depth and quality of the data obtained relies on how unbiased and skilled the interviewer is (Bless *et al.*, 2013). The interview process is additionally intensive, time-consuming, and data can pose challenging to standardise (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

The duration of the interviews of the 23 finalists (Appendix B) was one hour on video conferencing using Microsoft Teams. Starting with the most recently awarded finalists, the 23 finalists were interviewed in order, subjective to availability. All interviews were conducted by the researcher to ensure consistency in data collection. All efforts were made to minimise bias through effective rapport building at the onset and active listening throughout the interview process (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). The researcher intentionally avoided making comments or judgments, strictly adhering to pre-prepared, unbiased, and probing or clarifying questions (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Rapport, which speaks to a relationship that is open and trusting (Babbie, 2014), was established through authenticity, empathy, open questions, active listening, matching, and mirroring phrases, body language and tone of voice as well as by ensuring a common aspiration for understanding inclusion (Boeije, 2010; Bless *et al.*, 2013). The rapport developed at the onset of the interview, ensured that the participant was at ease and more likely to provide open and deep answers to the questions posed (Boeije, 2010).

Before commencing any interview, the researcher ensured that each participant read, signed and returned the participant consent form (Annexure H). To establish credibility, each interview started with an introduction to the interviewer and the purpose of the interview (Appendix A). During the introduction, assurances of

confidentiality were provided, and each participant was asked for permission to record the interview (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). What followed the introduction was a broad open-ended question pertaining to the leaders' journey into leadership and their cultivation of inclusion, followed by more probing questions seeking to understand the behaviours, beliefs, values, and skills employed at each stage (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). As is typical of open-ended questioning, responses generated by the interviewees themselves allowed for authentic, participant-led insights (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014).

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing using Microsoft Teams, and with the permission of the participants, the audio was recorded and converted to text for coding purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The advantage of the video conferencing interview format is that the interviewer could respond to non-verbal communication and adapt the interview style and questioning accordingly (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

3.6. DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Data analysis through coding enables the identification of segments of meaning in data and labels them with a code, thus enabling the summarising of rich data into a structure that is accessible (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021). From this structure, themes, and patterns can be identified and meaning extracted. Coding falls into two categories: deductive and inductive. In deductive data analysis, codes are predetermined based on existing research or a theoretical framework. In contrast, inductive analysis involves deriving codes directly from the data during the coding process, following a systematic and iterative approach (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021). The codes were derived from the participants' own words and phrases, mirroring their voices and forming the basis for building a theory, as is characteristic of constructivist grounded theory (Boeije, 2010; Babbie, 2014; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

All required measures were implemented to ensure the confirmability, dependability, transferability, and credibility of the study (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021).

The coding was carried out in the following four stages:

1. Firstly, attribute coding was applied across all 23 interview transcripts to identify the broad basic information attached to each transcript, such as the location of the participant, their gender, age, position, industry, and nationality (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021). When the interview transcripts were loaded to Atlas.ti the relevant groups were formed from the attribute coding.
2. Secondly, descriptive coding or content coding was applied to sentences contained in the interview transcripts to describe specific smalls sets of data, utilising Atlas.ti (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021). The research questions were used as a guide for the initial content coding.
3. Thirdly, the descriptive codes were then interpreted or categorised into concepts and themes in a reiterative and systematic manner, utilising Atlas.ti (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021).
4. Fourthly, the concepts and themes noted were then analysed for patterns of difference or similarity and reviewed for authenticity. This was achieved by downloading the data obtained from Atlas.ti into Excel and comparing and contrasting the codes, code categories, and themes. Findings were then extracted, presented visually, and theory produced (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021).
5. This analysis was supported by filtering the prominence of the various codes, code categories, and themes. This approach served as a descriptive framework rather than a quantitative measure, aligning with qualitative epistemological principles.

The coding process therefore progressed from broad attribute coding to specific descriptive coding, then to more abstract interpretive coding, and finally to

comparative analysis, after which findings were extracted and theory developed (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2021). The following section outlines the data analysis and coding process used in this study in greater detail.

The raw interview data was organised and readied for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). 'Analysis is a breaking up, separating, or disassembling of research materials into pieces, parts, elements or units' (Boeije, 2010:76). The analysis of qualitative data involves three steps; to reduce the data, through a selection, coding, and categorisation process, then to meaningfully display the data and, lastly, to conclude the findings (Boeije, 2010; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Meaningfully displaying the data involves identifying themes, categories, and patterns across data units, whereas drawing conclusions requires interpreting insights that reflect the overall picture emerging from the individual components (Boeije, 2010).

The semi-structured interview questions served as a guide based on the literature. The questions, however, were not considered limiting to the responses obtained; rather, the researcher sought to analyse the qualitative data in depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To reduce the qualitative data gathered through the semi-structured discussion guides, relevant interview data was selected, coded, and analysed using Atlas.ti in order to identify categories, themes, sentiment, thematic variables, and patterns (Castro *et al.*, 2010). A code transforms raw data into a standardised form (Babbie, 2014), through a label given to a unit or similar units of text that enables the emergence of categories, themes, patterns, and sentiment (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

This iterative process began with the first interview and continued until no new information emerged or theoretical saturation was achieved through data immersion (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Parts of the initial interview data were coded by examining the content to determine the key concepts, accompanied by note-taking to identify and code emerging topics (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All data codes were richly described and captioned (Bless *et al.*, 2013). As new data was analysed,

conceptual categories emerged through the review of the descriptive wording assigned to the coded topics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The codes and categories were then systematically and reiteratively organised (Bless *et al.*, 2013). Part of this process was reviewing if two codes repeatedly appeared together in the same sentence and if they needed to be merged into a unified code or category (Bless *et al.*, 2013). This systematic and re-iterative interpretation of results lead to conceptual modelling or the development of theory (Boeije, 2010).

The researcher was seeking to discover the meaning the leaders associated with their journey to inclusive leadership (Boeije, 2010), and coded all leadership beliefs, values, behaviours, and skills, as well as the stages of their journey to inclusion. Coding is essential for data management, ensuring that data is summarised meaningfully, with themes and categories clearly noted and easily retrievable. (Boeije, 2010). These codes were induced from the data as is expected from CGT and juxtaposed against the key themes that emerged from the literature review (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). As the coded data was categorised, the researcher reviewed the patterns and relationships that emerged from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). To ensure category reliability, the researcher ensured that category definitions were distinct (Boeije, 2010), clear, specific and aligned with the literature (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). To ensure validity, the researcher actively sought to avoid bias and assumptions, and to clearly articulate the research context to support optimal transferability (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

The qualitative data analysis results were reviewed for patterns and relationships, displayed, and interpreted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). CGT was subsequently developed from the qualitative data insights obtained, offering a thorough understanding of the research problem. The process followed an iterative or spiral approach with the researcher moving between data collection, analysis, and sampling or interviewing before returning to data collection (Boeije, 2010). The intent was to explore and explain inclusive

leadership and how the phenomenon may or may not have manifested differently in different contexts (Boeije, 2010).

The constant comparison between existing and new data provided richer insight into the phenomenon. The data analysis process was halted each time new data was identified in order to code, categorise, and test the new data (Boeije, 2010). The spiral process moved through data collection integrated with open coding (segmentation), axial coding (category description), and selective coding (data reassembly), ultimately leading to the conceptual model and findings (Boeije, 2010). Open coding was based on the researcher's initial labelling of concepts, while the results from the reanalysis of the open coding aimed to identify key concepts (axial coding), followed by selective coding, which focused on assessing the central concept (Babbie, 2014). As the data was coded, the researcher engaged in memo-ing in the form of code, theoretical, and operational notes (Babbie, 2014). Code notes pertained to the labels given and their meanings, theoretical notes covered the researchers' reflections on the meaning of concepts and their relationships, while operational notes referenced any issues with methodology (Babbie, 2014).

The researcher aimed to ensure that the emergent theory was sensitive to the context of inclusive leadership, easy to understand, generalisable and flexible enough for practical use (Boeije, 2010). The researcher, by means of the data analysis process, sought to understand, describe and amplify the participants' lived experiences through their own differing social constructs within the context of inclusive leadership (Bless *et al.*, 2013). The constant comparison method sought to discover, specify, reduce, and then integrate concepts into a final theory (Boeije, 2010). The integration of the concepts is considered the final stage of the data analysis, otherwise known as the research results or findings, where emerging themes and patterns are described in a logical, clear manner that adds value to the reader (Boeije, 2010). The central concept and underlying concepts were graphically displayed, known as conceptual mapping (Babbie, 2014).

3.6.1. Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are critical aspects to take into consideration when designing research and were carefully considered for this study (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By describing validity and reliability, the rigour of a study is indicated, and the findings are deemed as trustworthy, ensuring that a meaningful contribution can be made through this study (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Validity refers to how accurately the interpretations explore what was intended to be explored through: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the authenticity of the findings, transferability ensures the findings are applicable in other contexts, dependability confirms that the findings are consistent over time and confirmability means researcher bias has been neutralised as much as feasibly possible. This can be achieved through any number of the following means (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

1. The identification of techniques in the literature review
2. Clearly defining the constructs to be explored and how
3. Selecting techniques that have been validated in prior research
4. Establishing content validity (alignment between literature review themes and constructs to be explored)
5. Criterion-related validity (correspondence with other explorations)
6. Construct validity (ability to draw logical conclusions from the data collected and analysed)

Reliability refers to how stable and consistent the data analysis findings are. This can be achieved through any number of the following means (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

1. Utilising techniques from prior research that have proven reliable
2. The application of standardised participant instructions, the use of well-trained data collectors, and environments that have been control tested

3. Utilising qualitative research software for evaluating internal consistency
4. Stability and reliability, by exploring the same theme at two different time intervals with the same participants

The data analysed in this study was internally valid, as the sample accurately reflected the phenomenon of inclusive leadership being explored. The study was clearly structured and, therefore, deemed dependable (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014). To strengthen data validity, ensuring that the assessed information accurately reflects the journey toward inclusive leadership (Babbie, 2014), the researcher described the findings richly and used direct participant quotations. The researcher sought to note any biases as well as present conflicting or negative insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reiterative comparative analysis of the data collected and coded, until data saturation was reached, further enhanced the trustworthiness of the research process (Stake, 2005; Bless *et al.*, 2013).

To ensure data confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability referring to the consistent quality of the methods used to measure the data (Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014), the researcher employed four strategies: the review of all transcripts for transcription errors, the checking for any drift in meaning between codes, categories, and patterns, the peer review of results, and the review of findings against existing literature (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The peers in this study refer to the two academic supervisors assigned to supervise the research process, namely: Dr Corne Davis and Dr Sean McCoy. The peer review of results was preceded by a peer review of the codes applied (Bless *et al.*, 2013). The researcher additionally sought to be socially responsible and ensure that the participants interviewed were reflective of the demographics of the South African population and that the findings could be confirmed across various organisations in South Africa (Bless *et al.*, 2013).

3.7. RESEARCH DELIMITATIONS

In the context of this study, the researcher aimed to gain a deeper understanding of what facilitates the emergence of inclusion within an organisational brand leader's leadership style, as well as to provide guidance on supporting organisational brand leadership behaviours, skills, beliefs, and values. The iterative process of data analysis and theory integration helped to clearly define the scope of the emerging theory (Babbie, 2014).

This sums up the nature and scope of the study in relation to answering the research questions:

3.7.1. What is inclusive organisational brand leadership?

3.7.2. What enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader?

Data obtained outside of the scope of the research questions was not considered (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

3.8. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While this study sought to add value to the field of organisational brand leadership, the researcher aimed to maximise trust with and minimise unnecessary harm and risk to the participants (Boeije, 2010). Several ethical issues were considered, including: consent, data collection, the handling of sensitive information, incentivisation, unintended harm, confidentiality and deception (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021).

The researcher made every attempt possible to consider and proactively avoid any ethical issues from arising in the following manner:

3.8.1. Informed consent

Consent was sought from the relevant legal bodies within the organisation before conducting the semi-structured interviews. All participants were consulted and informed of the research, as well as any potential risks associated with participation, in accordance with their rights, which were fully respected (Bless *et*

al., 2013; Babbie, 2014). Signed consent to proceed was sought, prior to commencing the research (Boeije, 2010). No participant was coerced into signing a consent form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.8.2. Voluntary participation

During the initial consulting process no pressure was applied to any individual or body (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). There was no incentive for them to participate, and they were informed of their choice to participate in the research or not (Babbie, 2014). Their privacy was additionally respected in that, if they did not wish to answer or elaborate on a question, that was honoured (Boeije, 2010).

3.8.3. Respect for autonomy

All participants and bodies were informed that they may at any point during the study, extract themselves from the process, without providing a reason for doing so as their participation was strictly voluntary (Bless *et al.*, 2013). The researcher assumed a power balance existed, meaning that the participants and the researcher had an equal level of influence and control in the interaction, and focused on the participants' free will without coercion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.8.4. Anonymity and confidentiality

The interview information obtained was of a sensitive nature for both the institutions and their leadership. Participants had the right to remain anonymous (Babbie, 2014). The participants had a right to protection (Bless *et al.*, 2013) and all considerations were taken to ensure confidentiality with respect to the participant responses (Babbie, 2014). To protect the brand reputation of both the institutions and their leaders, no names were disclosed when coding the data, no names appear in any findings, and no information that could identify a participant was utilised. Only the research details were analysed, and patterns within the data were explored for the purposes of this study (Boeije, 2010). This approach also upheld the integrity of the data, as participants were more likely to provide authentic information.

3.8.5. Minimising harm

All care was taken to ensure participants were adequately prepared for the interview process by sending them the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A), the consent document for signing (Annexure H), which outlined the approach, as well as the consent letter from the body that granted them the Inclusive Leader Award (Appendix C) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

No undue harm was caused to them as a result of the research process. The researcher, with intent, guaranteed that the participants were not unduly harmed, exploited, deceived or coerced during the interview (Boeije, 2010; Bless *et al.*, 2013; Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was achieved by safeguarding that no participant was encouraged to share any comprising or emotionally sensitive material (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Their contributions towards the field of inclusive organisational brand leadership were expressly valued and communicated as such (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.8.6. Institutional permission

Research did not commence without a letter from the body that issued the Inclusive Leaders titles, indicating authorisation of the research approach and the use of the research data for publication purposes (Appendix C).

The researcher additionally did not proceed to collect data until such time as formal ethical clearance was granted by the Independent Institute of Education (IIE) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.8.7. Researcher bias

Researcher bias was mitigated by verifying the data with the participants to maintain understanding from their perspective, without leading the participant nor with tonal variations implying a positive or negative view by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher additionally utilised Atlas.ti to code the qualitative data and remove personal markers from the data that may have triggered conscious or unconscious bias (Babbie, 2014).

3.8.8. Limitations of the study

Limitations included time and resource constraints on both the researcher's and participants' sides, as the method was moderately time intensive (Boeije, 2010). Time constraints were mitigated through diligent planning and accommodating participants at their convenience. Although this technique may have been more time and resource-efficient than other methods, the study was limited by a bias toward the perspectives of brand executive leadership. Given that the participants were mostly brand executives, this sample may not have taken into consideration other elements contributing to inclusive organisational brand cultures capable of stakeholder-centric innovation.

The analysis of the data was additionally a time-intensive process, requiring skill and expertise that tested the researcher's capabilities (Boeije, 2010). The researcher scheduled dedicated time for research as well as for upskilling in the use of Atlas.ti. Efforts were made to avoid coding and categorisation errors; however, some may have occurred, or the definitions used may not have been sufficiently clear to produce consistently reliable insights (Bless *et al.*, 2013). Insights obtained also differed and posed a challenge to reconcile (Boeije, 2010).

Additionally, the researcher could not completely eliminate bias, which could have influenced the findings. Without sufficient probing questions, responses might have been interpreted through the researcher's own perspective (Bless *et al.*, 2013). This potential bias was further complicated by the researcher's role as a member of the authorising body, Business Engage NPC. To address these challenges, the researcher took steps to minimise errors, bias, and data inconsistencies through an iterative, anonymous data analysis process and peer review.

3.9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research on inclusive organisational brand leadership has highlighted the importance of understanding the specific factors that enable the development of inclusion in organisational brand leaders, as well as the

supporting behaviours, skills, values, and beliefs required for effective inclusive leadership. Using in-depth interviews with 23 finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award in Southern Africa, the study employed a CGT methodology to explore the subjective realities and meanings associated with the journeys of inclusive organisational brand leaders. The research findings offer organisational brand leaders valuable guidelines for cultivating inclusive leadership capable of enabling innovation suited for complex and uncertain times. By adopting inclusive leadership approaches that emphasise psychological empowerment, psychological safety, and inclusive cultures, organisations can build strong, authentic brands that create value for all stakeholders. This study does not, however, claim causal generalisability, cross-industry representativeness, or applicability to leaders at various developmental stages.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present the research findings derived from the contrastive analysis of the interview transcripts obtained from interviewing 23 inclusive leaders on their journey to inclusive leadership. The goal of the research was to develop new theory that can guide leaders on their journey to inclusive organisational brand leadership, the style of leadership best suited to innovation and change. The goal of the research was to be achieved by creating interview questions designed to answer the research questions, namely: what is inclusive organisational brand leadership and what enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader.

The chapter begins with a demographic data discussion that profiles the study participants to establish context for the research. It then moves into the results discussion, where insights and quotes from the semi-structured interview transcripts are explored in relation to the above mentioned research questions. The chapter continues by considering the literature and juxtaposing that against the emerging themes obtained from synthesising the interview transcripts. A key emerging theme evidenced in the interview findings was empathy. Empathy was then thoroughly explored in relation to the synthesis of the interview transcripts which culminated in the creation of the Inclusive Empathy Model.

The Inclusive Empathy Model, a key and distinctive finding of this research, was elaborated upon in depth using both the quotations from the interview transcripts and insights from the literature. This comprehensive approach ensured that the research goal was achieved through the development of a detailed guide supporting the emergence of inclusive organisational brand leadership through inclusive leadership. The Inclusive Empathy Model explores precursors to empathy, supporting beliefs and values, and empathetic practises, before concluding the chapter with a second key unique finding of the research, The Sequential Journey to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership. The Sequential

Journey to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership, highlights the steps a leader can take to adapt their leadership style to become more inclusive, starting with self-awareness through self-exploration.

4.2. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA DISCUSSION

The demographic data discussion seeks to describe the study population and assess the relevancy and generalisability of the findings. By examining the demographic characteristics, the research provides a clearer understanding of the participants, which in turn supports a more informed evaluation of how the findings may apply to a wider audience.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 of the national finalists of the Inclusive Leader Award in South Africa (Table 4), as vetted and issued by Business Engage NPC, over the past five years, (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). Two participants received an award for two consecutive years, giving a total of 25 awards for 23 participants.

Table 4: Participant award year

Award year	Number of participant awards
2020	2
2021	4
2022	5
2023	3
2024	11
	25

Of the 23 participants interviewed the majority held the highest offices within an organisation, that of Executive, Director, Head, Chair, or Partner (Table 5). Following this, four of the 23 participants were Founders of organisations, three were Managers, and one was a Lecturer.

Table 5: Participant designation

Designation	Number of participants
Executive - CEO	3
Executive - Marketing	2
Executive - Chief Transformation & Sustainability Officer	1
Executive - Investments and Chief Risk Officer	1
Executive - Responsible Business	1
Director - Human Resources	2
Director - Managing Director	1
Head - Corporate Affairs	1
Head - Learning and Development	1
Chairman	1
Partner - Senior Partner	1
Founder	4
Manager - Human Resources Manager	1
Manager - Senior Manager Life Assurance Operations	1
Manager - Senior Manager Talent Management and Organisational Development	1
Academic - Lecturer	1
	23

The category of company or organisation within which most of the participants held their office was within multinational listed companies (Table 6), second to this were national companies, then entrepreneurial organisations, and finally national listed companies. Of the 23 organisations, 11 were listed companies.

Table 6: Participant company or organisation category

Company or organisation category	Number of participants
Multinational Listed Company	9
National Company	5
Entrepreneur	4
National Listed Company	2
Multinational Company	1
Non-Profit Organisation	1
University	1
	23

Of these 23 organisations, six operated within the financial services sector (Table 7), followed by two within management consulting. The balance of the organisations were spread across several industries, many of which could be broadly classified within the professional services sector.

Table 7: Company or organisation industry

Company or organisation industry	Number of Participants
Financial Services	6
Management Consulting	2
Consulting and Technology Services	1
Consulting and Training	1
Education	1
Energy and Chemicals	1
Food Manufacturing	1
Industrial Technology	1
Legal	1
Maritime and Defence	1
Medical	1
Mining and Commodities	1
Retail	1
Telecommunications	1
Training and Development	1
Transportation	1
Tobacco	1
	23

The ethnicity of the participants broadly reflected the diversity of Southern Africa, where the majority population is Black; however, there was a noticeable overrepresentation of Indian and White participants relative to national demographics (Table 8). This skew may be reflective of the demographic makeup within specific sectors or organisational levels represented in the study. One participant was an immigrant from South America, residing in South Africa.

Table 8: Participant ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of Participants
Black	9
Indian	7
White	4
Coloured	2
Brazilian	1
	23

The age of the participants was representative of senior leadership, though weighted towards the 44-49 age group, followed by the 38-43 age group (Table 9).

Table 9: Participant age

Age	Number of Participants
56-61	2
50-55	3
44-49	10
38-43	6
32-37	2
	23

The gender of the participants was tilted towards female, with 18 of the participants being female and only five being male (Table 10).

Table 10: Participant gender

Gender	Number of Participants
Female	18
Male	5
	23

The region within which the participants operated from, was representative of the spread of business within Southern Africa, particularly given most of the organisations are listed entities (Table 11) and, in turn, Gauteng-based. Of the 23

participants, almost half operate from Gauteng (11), five from the Western Cape and three from KwaZulu-Natal.

Table 11: Participant region

Award Year	Number of Participants
South Africa - Gauteng	11
South Africa - Western Cape	5
South Africa - KwaZulu-Natal	3
South Africa - Eastern Cape	1
South Africa - Bloemfontein	1
Botswana – Gaborone	1
Zambia - Lusaka	1
	23

This concludes the discussion of demographic data, which sought to better understand the study participants before discussing the study results within this context. Descriptive codes were interpreted into concepts and themes using Atlas.ti to support the results discussion.

4.3. RESULTS DISCUSSION

The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore each leader's journey to inclusive leadership, seeking insights that could help answer the research questions in support of the research goal. The results discussion is a synthesis of the key insights obtained from analysing the interview transcripts. It is organised by interview question and includes literature insights and direct participant quotes relevant to each interview question presented.

The order is as follows: the major milestones participants experienced in their journey to leadership and inclusive leadership, the behaviours, skills, beliefs, and values that supported their inclusive leadership journey and style; their reflections on the one thing that most enabled their journey to inclusive leadership; and finally, any guidance offered to those seeking to embark on their own path to inclusive leadership.

The quotations retrieved from the Atlas.ti analysis, have been exported to Excel and labelled for verification purposes (Appendix E). The direct quotes are referenced using the Number (or ID) and Reference columns, the numbers displayed in these columns are a unique identifier for each quotation, indicating the document number and quotation location in that document. This ensures that all quotations are verifiable.

4.3.1. Major milestones in participants' journeys to leadership

When asked about their major milestones on the journey to leadership, many participants referenced early exposure (Table 12) to: disadvantage, family role models, career challenges, guidance from mentors and coaches, and the value of human connection.

Table 12: Key themes and sub-themes for major milestones in participants' journey to leadership

Key theme	Sub-themes
Early Exposure	Experience of disadvantage
	Role models such as family members who taught servant, community, and inclusive leadership through their values and behaviours
	Career challenges that exposed participants to navigating diversity and finding their voices
	Guidance from mentors and coaches
	Human connection

Participant one knew what it felt like to come from a disadvantaged background and how those from privileged backgrounds may not relate:

I came from the other side of the tracks...they came from privilege...they didn't know the view from there (1:4:5).

Participant 14 not only grew up in a disadvantaged area but was also exposed to a family role model who exemplified servant and community leadership:

Mine started in childhood – I was raised by a single mom and grew up... in a disadvantaged area. I saw my mom struggle, my first state in leadership was seeing her leading me and my sister and seeing her leadership role in church. She was a servant leader in community and church, and she was my role model (14:1:1-2).

Wong et al. (2019) emphasise servant leadership as focusing on others, community, service, consensus-building, and holistic development to better serve

clients. However, the literature overlooks how a disadvantaged background shapes a leader's values and character, influencing leadership style.

Participant 22 echoed the impact that being raised with a strong value for community had on their leadership journey:

...the concept of Ubuntu – how it affected everyone and the community. We are only as good as the community. It was a strong value in the culture, family, community (22:1:1-2).

This early exposure to disadvantage and struggle, framed by a sense of community and service, cultivated in them an openness to difference and a desire to serve others. Participant 11 modelled behaviours such as listening and giving quiet people a voice, inspired by her mother, an inclusive leader:

I was always drawn to leadership and my mom was an industrial psychologist and was always leaned towards inclusive leadership. I listen and take notes and then ask the quiet people their voice (11:1:1-2).

Yarbrough (2023) advocates proactive leadership development with coaching and mentoring to build relational competencies for inclusive leadership but does not discuss how early role modelling shapes a leader's approach.

Some participants mentioned that their leadership journey was shaped by early exposure to career challenges. This exposure developed skills that supported collaboration and created a desire to make a difference.

The learning curve was steep, and there I encountered various challenges, each of which I accepted as an opportunity to learn, grow and contribute to the organisation as best I could (22:3:5).

I was the only woman on exco and a person of colour on exco. On my leadership journey I didn't feel I did much – I participated but my views towed the line of the management at the time. I didn't have the courage or confidence to be intentional. For 3 or 4 years I went with flow. 2007/2008 I didn't want to be the only female sitting there and making a change. Then I needed to be heard – my voice and vision seen and heard and to make a change. That's when my journey to inclusion happened, I needed to be intentional and make a change (1:2:3).

I was the project lead and had to bring them together and create the partnerships between them – they had to collaborate and respect each

other otherwise it wouldn't have been a success. Respect each other, value each other and respect differences to get creativity and innovation output. Trust each other (4:1:1-2).

Hogan and Coote (2014) argue that innovative cultures value challenges to the status quo and view them as opportunities, but overlook how personal experiences shape one's approach to challenge.

Other participants mentioned the role that mentors and coaches played in inspiring them, developing necessary skills, and serving as a mirror to show where they needed growth. These sentiments are captured in the following quotes from Participants eight and seven:

I had very good mentors (8:3:4).

I was a graduate trainee... and the mentor was the CEO, and he exposed me early on to all strategic meetings... I was really inspired and a lot of my leadership was inspired by him, he really made sure we were exposed, mentored, coached... (7:1:1-2).

Shaari *et al.* (2015), Schaap & Dippenaar (2017) and Lasrado and Kassem (2021), corroborate the participants' views that leaders can improve their leadership skills and style through coaching.

A recurring theme echoed by participants was the significance of genuine, heart-centred human connection with team members through authenticity, respect, and time spent together.

Showing vulnerability was a strength and not a weakness, it showed I was authentic and human and there for them and not against. Not me and us (2:1:1-2).

Respect each other, value each other and respect differences to get creativity, innovation, output (4:1:1-2).

I was intentionally inclusive so that young people felt heard and seen and recognised and acknowledged and older people felt valued and not pushed out. The way to do it was about conversation, light lunches and team building and find a middle ground and common purpose – no matter your age, or economic background, gender, degree etc (1:5:6).

Participants saw leadership as grounded in connection through vulnerability, respect and empathy, building trust, psychological safety, and belonging. This aligns with Yikilmaz (2023) who links these outcomes to inclusive leadership and innovation. However, the literature does not address how early exposure to disadvantage, challenge, and role models shapes a leader's journey.

Although an individual's journey to leadership may differ from their journey to inclusive leadership, most participants answered question one and two very similarly. Consequently, the themes that emerged from inquiries about their major milestones echoed those found in their responses regarding major milestones in their inclusive leadership journey. This potentially indicates that participants largely do not perceive a distinction between leadership and inclusive leadership.

4.3.2. Major milestones in participants' journeys to inclusive leadership

When asked about their major milestones on the journey to inclusive leadership, many participants again referenced early exposure to disadvantage and diversity, family role models, career challenges, guidance from mentors, and the value of human connection (Table 13). A notable difference in responses was the introduction of empathy which served as a catalyst for the desire to empower others, as well as an inherent curiosity about others, which enabled greater open-mindedness.

Table 13: Key themes and sub-themes for major milestones in participants' journey to inclusive leadership

Key themes	Sub-themes
Early Exposure	Experience of disadvantage and diversity
	Role models such as family members who worked with and advocated for the disadvantaged
	Career challenges
	Guidance from mentors
	Human connection
	Empathy for and the desire to empower others
Inherent Curiosity	Open-mindedness about diversity

Two participants were exposed to disadvantage and diversity at an early age, which enabled the development of empathy and inclusion:

I learnt empathy at a young age and saw the struggles that people had (23:4:4-5).

I also learnt inclusion from disabilities as she worked with learners with special needs, and she pushed us to get involved in school – playing with the kids and getting them to help with certain concepts like pronouncing their names (5:5:6-7).

Participant 21's inclusive leadership journey was shaped by activist parents who emphasised the responsibility to serve others. This upbringing supported the cultivation of empathy within them, which they actively demonstrate through listening, inquiry, advice, and intervention.

It started when I was young – showcasing leadership – when there was a gap, I took that. My parents were both activists and they brought different people into the home. You need to take responsibility for taking care of people and bringing them support. If no services in our area people would come to my parents' house and if they arrive and say no water and electricity – we would call Eskom. It raised empathy within me. If you are able to share, be able to identify people in need. They don't need to say this person needs support – you should be able to identify that. I have 100+ employees and have almost all numbers and I will call and ask how someone is. And I ask over and over until they share – understanding beyond the work what is going on – I don't have to solve – just listen. Some I give advice or intervene. Just pick up the phone from empathy and ask how are you. (21:4:6).

Participant 22 turned an early career challenge into a catalyst for inclusive leadership by choosing to view the perpetuator as a mentor, which helped build their resolve and enabled mutual respect.

Unbeknown to him, I made him my mentor and used every hurdle he set up as a tool to strengthen my resoluteness. Over the years, we have developed a sound mutually respectful relationship and from that I learnt about the evolution of the inclusivity journey (22:10:13).

Some participants were naturally more open to and compassionate towards social and cultural diversity through curiosity from an early age as captured in the below quotes:

Inclusivity was never a problem, it came naturally, I always believed in respecting each person and different cultures (2:2:3-4).

Something in me from a young age was curious what it was like to be in someone's shoes, I made an effort to talk to people beyond my circle, people across functions, colour barrier, language barrier, also

coming from an English background and marrying an Afrikaans guy and that deeper dive of diversity and then my stepdaughter had a relationship with a black Nigerian man at 16 and then that challenges your biases. My husband's son came out as gay and that was challenging and then I also formed a close relationship with my domestic and her children became my family, and it helped me to put myself in their shoes to deeply listen and understand and seeing privilege. And often working with diverse teams, mixed groups, African people. I worked in the mines with black African miners. Gender issues around inclusion, I worked a lot with male mentors, only later I got exposed to female role models. (10:2:3–4).

Praveenadevi and Girimurugan (2019), Malik (2023) and Yikilmaz (2023) note that innovative cultures embrace diversity. Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) find inclusive leaders excel at inclusion and diversity, but the literature overlooks how early exposure to diversity, disadvantage, and challenge shapes leadership. Similarly, Malik (2023) highlights curiosity as a key trait of inclusive leaders, but does not explore if it is innate or should be assessed before leadership appointments.

In witnessing their own development through the guidance they received, participants cultivated a deep desire to help others to develop their inherent abilities.

And many years later... I developed a programme... to empower women who had no access to tech role models and educating them – we provide tech and digital skills and mentorship to find employment (4:5:9).

I also taught them about consciousness and living in the moment, humility, empowerment, diversity – how can you bring everyone together make them feel included and invested (8:7:6-7).

We want to empower the girl child and establish clubs in the village so that we can find their voices, so they contribute to decision makers etc and create safe platform to talk about their sexual education and interests (20:2:3–4).

A repeated theme echoed by participants was the significance of a heart-centred human connection with colleagues through vulnerability, empathy, authenticity, and humility.

When I show vulnerability people do more for me and (are) more committed – I am just human just like you (11:8:9)

I am passionate about human connection because life wasn't easy – even getting (my) degree was like winning the lotto (1:8:10).

(M)e being strong about authenticity and bringing people together (12:6:7-8).

Inclusivity means part of and equal to. ...Part of successes or failure, I never saw myself as greater than (2:2:3-4).

Yarbrough (2023) confirms that leaders who prioritise human connection, create safe, inclusive environments, and inspire trust. Leaders in this study relied on formative experiences and mentorship to develop skills for inclusion, highlighting a significant gap in the literature regarding early life experiences.

The participants model accountability and transparency, by creating opportunities for feedback and open dialogue within a collaborative team culture. They prioritise team success while recognising individual contributions. Leadership centres on nurturing others' growth through a leader's intentions, skills, and knowledge (Vukadinović, 2022). Inclusive leaders deliberately create inclusive spaces (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021), as reflected in quotes from Participants 19 and 14 below.

We allowed every manager to talk about their past and their perceptions and broke down unconscious biases – we allowed people to talk about their experiences and culture and struggles and be frank (19:6:8).

It comes down to who I am, one of my strongest attributes is that I listen, I intentionally build inclusive teams – hiring diverse talents and fostering inclusive teams and empathy (14:4:5-6).

Many participants attributed their leadership and inclusive leadership journeys to early life exposure to disadvantage, diversity, and empathy, often shaped by family role models or challenging environments that cultivated values like Ubuntu, respect, and inclusion. For some, natural curiosity and intentional efforts to understand others' perspectives deepened their commitment. Others were guided by mentors and career challenges that shaped their leadership development.

Central to their experiences was an emphasis on heart-centred human connection through empathy, vulnerability, and authenticity, which cultivated trust and

belonging. These leaders actively created inclusive spaces by encouraging open dialogue, accountability, and collaboration, demonstrating that inclusive leadership is a dynamic interplay of personal values, the beliefs that underpin them, lived experiences, and intentional actions.

Empathy was the key difference in how participants viewed their leadership journey and inclusive leadership. They linked empathy to inclusion and saw it as the catalyst for their desire to empower others. Empathy also strengthens human connection and trust (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023).

4.3.3. Key behaviours supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

To better understand the behaviours that inclusive leaders demonstrate, the researcher first explored the behaviours that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys and then examined whether these were the same behaviours that supported their current inclusive leadership styles. For the purposes of this study, a behaviour is considered an observable and measurable response to a stimulus. In exploring the behaviours that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys, one key theme emerged (Table 14): a growth mindset or openness to learning.

Table 14: Key themes and sub-themes for key behaviours supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

Key themes	Sub-themes
Growth mindset	Openness to change
	Vulnerability
	Curiosity and open mindedness
	Listening
	Kindness
	Empathy

The participants demonstrated behaviours that underpin a growth mindset. According to AlSaied and Alkhoraif (2024), innovation is enhanced by a growth mindset. They were not only open to change and open minded, they were active change agents and listeners.

Openness to change and being a change agent is illustrated in the following quotes from Participant 14, 15 and 22:

Growth mindset and being open to change – when you bring voices to (the) table – not putting on preconceived ideas and see where that takes you (14:6:8-9).

To be a change agent and include others who may not be seen. Someone said privilege is invisible to those who have it. A lot of the time we don't realise the privilege we have and looking for what we don't have (15:10:12-13).

Taking decisive steps to prepare myself for a leadership journey which I knew must entail having the ability to create inclusive spaces and places for all people, be it at work, or in general (22:15:19).

According to Hogan and Coote (2014), innovation is preceded by openness to change. Two participants introduced comfort with vulnerability as key to this openness, a precursor to humility and an acknowledgement that no one knows everything. Literature supports that inclusive leaders embrace vulnerability (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Düger, 2019; Rehman *et al.*, 2019).

Open mindedness is linked to vulnerability, any change has to start with being open and being available to it. If you are not open to change you won't change (9:8:10-11).

You need to be vulnerable as a leader – you don't know all the answers... (17:7:8-9).

Participants emphasised openness to difference and learning is the foundation of inclusive leadership, highlighting the importance of being comfortable not knowing everything and listening without judgement. According to Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), inclusive leaders create psychologically safe environments for learning and knowledge exchanged. These sentiments are captured in the following quotes:

I am inquisitive about different cultures and religions – to me it is very interesting. You cannot be inclusive without understanding other people's cultures and belief and what other people are like... (2:4:5-6).

Curiosity, openness to learning, not knowing it all, there is so much out there to understand and know... (10:3:5-6).

One of the big ones was curiosity about difference, I spent a lot of time understanding people and what makes them tick. Listen and listen without judgement and do not expect a specific answer (12:7:9-10).

Several participants highlighted listening as key. In inclusive cultures diverse perspectives are not only heard but appreciated (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016; Odor, 2018). One participant said genuineness requires listening. Another participant noted understanding others depends on listening; and a third participant emphasised listening to both spoken and unspoken messages.

Being genuine – people need to feel you are genuine. It's about listening and listening with intent (1:9:11-12).

Being a good listener and when I listen I understand what they want (16:6:8-9).

Listening was a very important behavioural skill – to what people were saying and not saying (22:11:14-15).

Participants linked kindness and empathy to a growth mindset and openness to change. Acts of kindness build trust over time, enabling psychological safety, and the acceptance of diversity (Men *et al.*, 2020). Empathy increases leaders' approachability, strengthening connections, collaboration and trust (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023). Leaders who act with kindness and empathy are more open to others' views, as shown by Participant 15 and 18.

See people how they are, I try to be kind, if you sow kindness it costs you nothing to be kind and try and be better every day where you can (15:12:15).

Empathy stands out, it is the essence and fibre of my being (18:4:6-7).

The key overarching theme when asked which behaviours supported the participants' leadership journey was a growth mindset, supported by listening. The participants were open to change, vulnerable, curious, open minded, kind and empathetic. All of these attributes support a growth mindset, which is indicated as essential for creating inclusive environments

4.3.4. Key behaviours supporting participants' inclusive leadership style

The participants were then asked what behaviours support their current leadership style in order to take note of any variations between behaviours that supported their inclusive leadership journey and their current inclusive leadership

style. Two key themes emerged (Table 15): being approachable and leaving people better.

Table 15: Key themes and sub-themes for key behaviours supporting participants' inclusive leadership styles

Key themes	Sub-themes
Approachable	Authentic, open, and honest
	Objective and clear feedback
	Self-reflective
	Mutual respect
	Trust
Leave people better	Develop and believe in others
	Servant leadership
	Assertiveness

Several participants stated that their inclusive leadership styles were deeply rooted in being approachable. Participants 11 and 21 highlighted authenticity, integrity, openness, and honesty as key to approachability.

Authenticity is the biggest thing, I don't play games, I am open and honest... (11:11:14-15).

Empathetic, authentic, integrity. My team will tell you there are things she won't do. So that you team and colleagues know you and no confusion in what you believe in – your values, culture and what you believe in (21:10:13-14).

Inclusive leaders embody integrity, demonstrated by the consistency between their words and actions (Younas *et al.*, 2020b, Yikilmaz, 2023). Participant one introduced objective, helpful, and clear feedback as foundational to being viewed

Being approachable as people feel comfortable to talk to me, to ask for guidance, to trust me, I have always been open and transparent and give feedback objectively. Helpful, clear and concise so no misunderstanding (1:11:14-15).

Two participants highlighted the value of self-reflection, not reaction, as an aspect of approachability, alongside soliciting feedback on how one is perceived.

I am not so quick on the keyboard. I take time to think. I won't type an upset email until the morning. Reflecting a lot instead of reacting (1:11:14-15).

The ability to self-reflect and still continuously check with people and get feedback (10:5:8-9).

The literature addresses approachability and feedback, and considers awareness of thoughts and emotions an aspect of Emotional Intelligence (EI) (Lu *et al.*, 2022), but self-reflection in inclusive leadership remains underexplored.

Inclusive leadership is shown through behavioural integrity: attentive listening, respect, accessibility, openness to ideas, timely appreciation, dialogue, constructive feedback promptly, and accountability for failures (Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Participant two spoke of mutual respect as a means of showing interest in others and as key to approachability.

One of the biggest is mutual respect, to be approachable. Show interest in staff, get to know my staff (2:5:7-8).

A strongly emphasised theme was leaving people better than when you found them. While a leader's beliefs are underexplored in the literature, benevolence aligns with inclusive leadership (Men *et al.*, 2020), Participant five demonstrates this through how they treat people, Participant six through investing in others, and through feedback.

Through my own experiences I have learnt harshly from leaders I made a decision not to be like. From my mom and grandmoms teachings – leave people better – treat people as you would like to be treated (5:9:10-11).

I will take money to develop others. I set money aside to do executive coaching as I have seen what it did for me and I support others with access to it. To have other leaders believe in me and I need to do the same to invest in others (6:12:15-16).

My purpose is lifting as I rise, give the feedback to people, give them the mirror, let them see themselves, hear themselves (6:12:15-16).

High EI inclines a leader toward servant leadership, focused on others, community, and service, a form of transformational leadership (Wong *et al.*, 2019; Hameli & Ordun, 2022). Transformational leaders act as role models (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). Several leaders emphasised role modelling service, the importance of community and utilising their platforms to promote inclusion outside of the workplace through community upliftment projects. Several participants emulate this sentiment:

I am a servant leader – I am here to serve the people , my team, my company, my community (7:9:12-13).

Advocacy – I am very intentional about educating people whether financial literacy, creating wealth, or mental health (9:9:12-13).

Listening and how do I incorporate all those views – from women, elders, youth etc (16:7:10-11).

I make sure that voices are heard and they understand each other. (16:7:10–11).

Malik (2023) identified courage as one of six behavioural traits of inclusive leaders. Participant 14 mentioned the importance of courage in speaking up and addressing change, but in a way that, as noted by Participants 18 and 23, is assertive rather than aggressive, does not impose on others, and comes from a place of confidence.

To address Inclusion and diversity – the courage to speak up, address the elephant in the room (14:8:11-12).

I am learning assertiveness and not aggression and that comes with confidence. In raising psychological safety intentionally and creating those environments informs my style (18:8:11-12).

Not to impose. To ask the enquiring questions rather than to be instructive. Ask the questions that lead people to understanding – they will come to a better response (23:8:10-11).

In summarising the behaviours that supported the inclusive leaders' journey and their styles, participants emphasised being intentional not only in creating inclusive spaces but also in developing the behavioural skills within themselves and others to sustain those spaces.

The courage to be vulnerable was considered an enabler of authenticity, helping to build trust, safety, and connection. With few exceptions, participants were, humble, curious, and open to learning, which enhanced their adaptability and inclusiveness of difference.

Lastly, authenticity emerged as the most frequently reiterated behaviour underpinning a number of key themes and sub-themes. Participants expressed a strong commitment to staying true to themselves and modelling that authenticity

in their leadership, with the aim of creating an environment where others feel safe, seen, and empowered to do the same. Several participants also reflected on the influence of role models in their paths of self-discovery and their desire to serve others.

4.3.5. Key skills supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

To better understand the skills that support inclusive leadership, the researcher first explored the skills that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys and then examined whether these were the same skills that supported their current inclusive leadership styles. For the purposes of this study, a skill is considered the ability to perform effectively, acquired through training, practice, or experience. In exploring the skills that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys, three key themes emerged (Table 16): empowerment, symmetrical communication, and active listening, and consistency.

Table 16: Key themes and sub-themes for key skills supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

Key themes	Sub-themes
Empowerment	Enabling access to opportunity and growth
	Emotional Intelligence and empathy
Symmetrical communication and active listening	Adapting a communication style to the receiver and listening to hear
	Learning
	Persevering to create seats for others
Consistency	Trust through authenticity, fairness, and respect

Javed *et al.* (2019) and Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), highlight the relationship between innovative work behaviour, inclusive leadership, and empowerment, incorporating equity (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). Several participants spoke strongly about empowerment, especially facilitating access and opportunity to the previously disempowered. The following quotes illustrate this sentiment:

Empowerment, I love to empower other people. I want to empower people – all – subordinate, patients, collaborators. Love women in empowerment. Especially with what I have gone through (8:10:12-13).

I spend a lot of time off site to drive alignment on inclusion, a better life for all people - society and organisation. It means to give all people who were

disempowered a chance to have access to opportunity and growth – women, race, LGBTQ – all pillars. They get access and empowerment – people want to work here for promotion, growth, salary etc. (17:9:13-14).

Empathy, an aspect of EI, involves suspending personal beliefs, actively listening (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021), and understanding others' perspectives and emotions (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). The quote below synthesises curiosity and awareness of cultures, biases with communication, and listening skills that empower and help others grow through empathy:

Cultural awareness, bias awareness, communication skills, building trust, active listening, empowering others, helping people to grow, empathy, curiosity about others. (4:9:15-16).

EI incorporating empathy, was consistently referenced by participants, as illustrated by the following quotes:

EQs skills were important, understanding people, showing empathy and compassion and being firm when you needed (1:13:17-18).

Exceptional interpersonal skills, from observational doing (7:10:14-15).

A consistent theme was active listening and adapting communication to serve others. Inclusive leadership is relational, marked by effective communication, active listening, dialogue, and feedback (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023).

(L)istening is a skill that has to be mastered in leadership, also very strong communication skills and empathy (19:12:16-17).

I can adapt to different communication styles – you have to know your staff – some are sensitive, some you must be direct, some people want facts, some people don't want to be asked about their family, they want to do the job (2:7:9-10).

Communication, I am good with communication and listening... (5:10:12-13).

Participant 14 viewed effective communication as including the ability to handle conflict through courageous conversations. Marathe *et al.* (2017), confirm that courage enables effective conflict resolution.

Dealing with conflict and having courageous conversations (14:10:14-15)

Leaders help create and reinforce culture through communication (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021). Communication is the most critical tool for transformation (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Participant nine said leadership is about communication. Participant three highlighted that it helps others see where they need to go, supported by the right enablers; and Participant six emphasised the power speech has to command a room.

Leadership is about communication (9:10:14-15).

The ability to make others see and the skill to create the right enablers. Policies, procedures, actions (3:7:11-12).

The power to speak and stand in front of people and not have nerves and keep quiet until you have their attention – it's a powerful thing to command a room (6:14:17-18).

The participants again mentioned being intentional learners, with an openness to feedback for the purpose of growth. These sentiments are illustrated by the following quotes from Participants seven and eight:

...I am curious, and I am continually learning and seek a level of discomfort. I am intentional about always seeking feedback especially on blind spots and things I don't see and working with my coach who has been critical to my journey and remaining grounded (7:10:14-15).

Growth, learning and a desire to grow (8:10:12-13).

This resolve to endure discomfort came from a desire to be a role model to others. Participants mentioned having navigated challenges related to culture or gender biases when transitioning into leadership roles. This cultivated in them not only a desire to intentionally create inclusive spaces and embed inclusion into the organisational culture, but also empathy for the journey of others who follow, as well as the skill to create those inclusive spaces, as illustrated below:

There were days I cried alone because it was tough, and you are not winning and I have been bullied by other females who believe you are not worthy – the perseverance came from knowing I have a family and a responsibility to be a better example to my family. The struggle to fall pregnant – I had to persevere to know that someday I would have a child looking up to me with their challenges and if I didn't then how would I teach them perseverance. I needed to create that pathway and be a role model. I wanted to create seats for others female (19:14:19).

Challenges were not only professional but also personal, beginning at home, in school and early careers where participants took on roles that developed skills essential for inclusive leadership. The literature does not explore early exposure to these challenges or the role they play in shaping skills.

Inclusive leaders champion fairness (Yikilmaz, 2023), and empathy, characterised by authentic responses and a commitment to fairness (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017; Anand et al., 2023), precedes respect, creating a fairer environment (Korkmaz et al., 2022). By role modelling consistency through authenticity, fairness, and respect, leaders cultivate inclusive spaces where everyone feels safe, seen, and heard.

Authenticity helps you be consistent... (19:12:16-17).

Objective and consistent with how you deal with things... (1:13:17-18).

I am a very fair person – I look at bias and how to eliminate it, I am very respectful of people's culture. Respect people (8:10:12-13).

The participants consistently responded to this question through the lens of intentional empowerment, symmetrical communication, and active listening. Their behaviour was described as consistent, fair, respectful, and authentic, underpinned by Emotional Intelligence. This included empathy, openness to learning, and a strong commitment to making a difference and creating safe spaces where all felt included.

4.3.6. Key skills supporting participants' inclusive leadership style

The participants were then asked what skills support their current leadership style, in order to take note of any variations between skills that supported their inclusive leadership journey and their current inclusive leadership style. Three key themes

emerged (Table 17): emotional and cultural intelligence, listening, and openness to learning.

Table 17: Key themes and sub-themes for key skills supporting participants' inclusive leadership styles

Key themes	Sub-themes
Emotional and cultural intelligence	Fairness and respect
	Belonging and uniqueness
	Collaboration
	Empathy
	Psychological safety
Listening	Motivation
	Positive and negative feedback
Openness to learning	Adaptability

Inclusive leadership was indicated by participants as deeply rooted in fairness and respect, supported by emotional and cultural intelligence. Empathy, a component of Emotional Intelligence, was repeatedly referenced as essential to truly connecting with others, creating psychologically safe spaces where individuals feel seen and heard and empowering them to contribute authentically. The participants promoted belonging by embracing the uniqueness of others, through empathetic, and culturally intelligent practices.

(F)airness and respect and about being collaborative, being emotionally and culturally intelligent which is important to foster inclusion and the ability to empower others and enable them to be seen and noticed. Having the ability to promote psychological safety... (4:12:19-20).

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence, you need to empathise as a leader and understand peoples stories, you don't need to agree, just understand where they are coming from (6:15:19-20).

My interpersonal skills, people skills, empathy and people developer. Along with work in inclusion and diversity is the importance of making psychologically safe spaces where people are seen and heard – that is very critical to who I am (7:11:16-17).

I am very empathetic – I want to learn more about the person (9:12:17-18).

(S)tronger emphasis on empathy, understanding and appreciating the contribution for each individual for who they are (18:22:31-32).

EQ, heart for people, empathy, compassion, listening (14:11:16-17).

Yarbrough (2023) underscores relational skills as vital for effective leadership, and Malik (2023) lists them among six inclusive leader traits. Empathy and EI allow leaders to connect at a deeper level (Yarbrough, 2023).

Listening was again mentioned by several participants as a key skill supporting their current leadership style. Inclusive leaders actively listening (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Participant one noted that listening enabled them to do more in terms of motivating people toward their goals.

Now that I have more experience I have improved, I am usually quite calm in a crisis, I can listen to people better and extract their issues and do more in terms of motivating and pushing people to achieve their personal goals (1:15:20-21).

Inclusive leaders focus on followers by listening attentively, welcoming guidance and new ideas, engaging in dialogue, and giving prompt feedback (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023). Participant two highlighted giving balanced feedback, helping others grow, and being fully present when listening.

Fairness, recognition, positive and negative feedback, growth gaps and being present. Hearing and not listening, hear while you are listening (2:10:12-13).

Openness to learning was highlighted as a key skill by several participants. This skill was demonstrated in the reflections shared by four participants, whose quotes illustrate the importance they placed on continuous learning and adaptability.

I am highly adaptable, I am a chameleon and I am not structured – open to trying different things and discovering and that is serving me well... (12:15:21-22).

Show me any leader who hasn't made mistakes or fallen down and how did they rise from learning (6:15:19-20).

Strategy – I am strategic which is a skill I have honed over time and through experiences, the ability to learn fast while doing. Because I have been in different industries and with different people (5:11:14-15).

A bit of questioning skills to ask the right questions, I don't know everything because it is impossible... (3:8:13-14).

The participants largely responded to this question through the lens of emotional and cultural intelligence as enablers of fairness, respect, belonging and uniqueness, collaboration and psychological safety. Empathy, an aspect of emotional and cultural intelligence, was frequently reiterated as foundational to these enablers. Additional skills such as listening, giving feedback, and openness to continuous learning were consistently emphasised, highlighting their importance in motivating others, promoting growth, and adapting leadership practices.

4.3.7. Key beliefs supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

To better understand the beliefs that support inclusive leadership, the researcher first explored the beliefs that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys and then examined whether these were the same beliefs that supported their current inclusive leadership styles. For the purposes of this study, a belief is considered a mental state involving the acceptance of a proposition as true, which shapes thoughts, decisions, and actions. In exploring the beliefs that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys, three key themes emerged (Table 18): the belief in unity, the belief in others, and self-awareness.

Table 18: Key themes and sub-themes for key beliefs supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

Key themes	Sub-themes
The belief in unity	A fair, equitable world
	Community, everyone matters
	Being kind and compassionate
	Making a difference
The belief in others	Everyone has a purpose
	Integrity and honesty
Self-aware	Open minded
	Faith

The literature shows that inclusive leaders champion justice, fairness, and equity, and create inclusive cultures focused on fairness, equality, and diversity (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019; Yikilmaz, 2023), but it does not explore solidarity and the belief in solving problems in unity.

Resoundingly, the participants believed that everyone matters, that the world should be fair and equitable, and that there is strength in unity due to our

interconnected nature. They affirmed that every human being is worthy of being treated with fairness and respect, and that every person has inherent value. Several participants believe that good leaders are kind and have a responsibility to leave the world a better place.

A belief in a fair, equitable world, to make a difference in that way. Being kind and finding ways to make people feel good about themselves, enriched and empowered (10:9:15-16).

Ubuntu – I am human and you are human – seeing that – regardless of whether there is benefit or not I always see the human and engage with respect and compassion (7:13:19-20).

Human beings are not that different, they all want the best for themselves and their community or children, if they can get what they need for themselves that will be enough for them and the community they leave. Everything we do has an impact on all of us (16:16:23).

There is greater strength in unity – there is unity in diversity and strength in diversity – if you bring everyone together you are stronger – I really believe that we are stronger when we are more united (23:16:19-20).

Again, resoundingly, the participants held a strong belief in the goodness and potential of every person. They saw their role as supporting others to succeed, and removing barriers to inclusivity. They have an abundance mindset, believing that every person has talent and a purpose in this world, and that by enabling them to succeed, everyone will shine brighter. Lastly, several participants spoke about a belief in integrity, emphasising that integrity must always be consciously upheld.

Integrity, honesty, I believe everyone wants to be a winner. Not a single person wants to fail. If I can help you win, I will be by your side. I will help you win (2:11:14-15).

I don't think there is limitations to everyone, I believe everything is possible and I try remove barriers to inclusivity, we put the barriers in when there are not. (3:10:16-17).

Everyone has a talent and I am not better than anyone. Everyone has brilliance and a star within that shines bright and if we discover that they will shine bright and I will shine bright and everyone will (11:16:23-24).

My belief is that every person has an incredible sense of self-worth and value and that is not to be diminished in a disrespectful way or that violates their psychological or bodily integrity and where integrity is upheld (18:16:23-24).

The literature shows inclusive leaders and inclusive organisational brand cultures drive greater innovation by tapping into individual and collective potential (Randel, 2023), but it does not address belief in each person's human potential, purpose, and inherent goodness.

Inclusive leadership transcends single-loop learning by addressing root causes, speeding recovery, and preventing errors (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Participants emphasised continual learning, trial and error, and embracing mistakes, highlighting the leaders' role in normalising imperfection through vulnerability and encouraging growth. Quotes from two participants below capture these insights:

From parents, teachers, reading – the greats, Steve Covey, Scott M Peck, Ghandi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, mentors. Trial and error. I was interested in experimenting, learning and adopting beliefs (10:9:15-16).

We are not perfect so the people we lead must be able to make mistakes without fear of interrogation. It is important we make mistakes and show we are vulnerable. To help them to learn, get back up and move forward (1:17:25).

Participant 14 believes that self-awareness and self-worth are foundational to how they show up and their level of awareness of others. This sentiment was echoed by several participants.

It all starts with me – my level of self-awareness – how I show up – being proud of who I am and how I show up and how do I pay it forward and being aware of the people that rely on me (14:12:18-19).

Self-awareness allows recognition of one's impact on others (Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Although Lu *et al.* (2022) link EI to improved self-acceptance, the literature does not specifically address self-worth.

Lastly, faith was mentioned by Participant 15 as key to their belief system and as providing the support they needed to fulfil their duties as inclusive leaders. This sentiment was affirmed by several participants but not explored in the literature.

The foundation of my faith, I believe that God plays a role in who we are and tap into that and have faith God is in front and has your back (15:19:24-25).

The participants were emphatic in their belief in unity towards a fair and equitable world, that everyone matters, and that everyone has purpose and potential. With few exceptions, they were kind, compassionate, and open minded, supported by a strong sense of self-awareness, a belief in making a difference, and a commitment to operating with integrity.

4.3.8. Key beliefs supporting participants' inclusive leadership style

The participants were then asked what beliefs support their current leadership style, in order to take note of any variations between beliefs that supported their inclusive leadership journey and their current inclusive leadership style. Three key themes emerged (Table 19): courage, making people feel valued, and respect for every individual.

Table 19: Key themes and sub-themes for key beliefs supporting participants' inclusive leadership styles

Key themes	Sub-themes
Courage	Empowerment is a choice
	Drive Change
Make people feel valued	Listening
	Collaboration and discourse
	Self-awareness
	Empathy
	Communication
Respect	Humility

Participants again emphasised beliefs consistent with those supporting their inclusive leadership journeys, centred around principles of Ubuntu and togetherness. They expressed that humanity has a collective responsibility to ensure a fair and equitable world, where opportunities are equally available, especially for the disenfranchised. They reiterated their commitment to making a difference and changing lives, with a consistent belief that all humans have potential.

Participant 22 viewed being part of a minority group as empowering, offering a unique perspective on the world. From this vantage point, they chose to empower

others rather than disempower them, recognising their own connection to the system and the risk of being disempowered themselves. They emphasised the interconnectedness of the world, aligning with earlier statements of unity.

Being part of a minority group in SA meant often being on the outskirts and this afforded me a great vantage point from which to introspect and to see the world. Being a part of the minority was an empowering experience for me. ...I knew we each have the choice to either create an enabling environment for ourselves and for other people, or to disempower other people and ultimately disempower ourselves (22:30:47).

The choice to empower or disempower was echoed by several participants who reiterated their belief in change, new ideas, and a new vision. At the final stage of inclusion, leaders show courage and commitment by challenging others and dedicating resources to support an inclusive culture (Malik, 2023). Participant one believes in driving change with courage and perseverance.

The beliefs I promoted is to drive change, new ideas and new vision. Another value is the importance of having courage and not letting circumstance let me down. It is something I plant in the minds of others – be courageous and persevere (1:20:28).

The theme most strongly associated with participants' leadership style, rather than their journey, was ensuring that everyone felt valued and deserving of a metaphorical seat at the table. When an employee feels valued, they are more inspired to innovate (Lei et al., 2023). The participants achieved this through: patience, empathy, self-awareness, listening and communication skills, promoting discourse, and ultimately respect.

To have patience and not expect everyone to learn at the same pace, to learn to guide, not to make one person feel their opinion is worth less than a brighter person in the team. To listen to each and every suggestion in the collaboration. To make them feel valued (2:12:16-17).

Empathy, self-awareness, listening skills, communication skills, awareness. I saw awareness around me – I saw unfair situations. I was very aware of the unfairness between people around me and it made me more wanting to break that down and break down the biases (4:15:24-25).

I am also big on encouraging teams to have comfortable and uncomfortable conversations with one another to build productive

teams and innovate together. Shared vision, communication, motivation, work to people's strengths, break silos, allowing people to leverage relationships (6:17:23-24).

I don't see my team as numbers I manage – I see them as human beings (21:20:27-28).

I make a great deal about respect (23:22:26).

The participants were resoundingly humble, despite mostly holding the highest offices in their organisations. They advocated for empathy, humility and the vulnerability to be themselves, role-modelling authenticity for others. The literature confirms that empathetic leaders are humble and create psychologically safe environments where everyone feels seen and valued (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015; Yikilmaz, 2023).

Participant eight's quote below summarises this sentiment:

More humility – embracing nurturing and empathy and opening up my vulnerability (8:13:18-19).

The beliefs supporting inclusive leadership emphasise fairness, equality, equity and the conscious choice to empower oneself and others. Participants showed courage in driving change and strongly believed in making others feel valued through empathy, self-awareness, listening, communication, collaboration, humility, and respect. They aim to enrich lives.

4.3.9. Key values supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

To better understand the values that support inclusive leadership, the researcher first explored the values that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys and then examined whether these were the same values that supported their current inclusive leadership styles. For the purposes of this study, a value is considered an enduring belief that guides attitudes, decisions, and behaviours. In exploring the values that supported the inclusive leaders' journeys, three key themes emerged (Table 20): respect, authenticity, and integrity.

Table 20: Key themes and sub-themes for key values supporting participants' inclusive leadership journeys

Key themes	Sub-themes
Respect	Honesty
	Promoting belonging
Authenticity	Confidence
	Passion
Integrity	Trustworthy and reliable

Respect, authenticity, and integrity were the three most frequently mentioned values. Participants saw these as foundational to inclusive leadership.

The participants believed every person, regardless of title or background, deserves respect, which is essential for creating a sense of value and inclusion, including respecting others' time. Inclusive leaders focus on followers, showing respect and timely appreciation for all (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023).

Respect, honesty, respect allows you to listen to other people. If you are able to respect everyone you cannot harm them (16:18:26-27).

We can all write policy but it's about a feeling of inclusion and feeling value, to belong and it comes with (EI) skills and respect and tolerance and passion (1:21:29-30).

Respect for the rule of law, people from different backgrounds, culture, religions, beliefs, I value people who are humble, humility comes a long way and comes a long way and opportunity for people to relate to you (20:13:21-22).

One value I have is respect – I am very stressed if late – the value of commitment with people's time and energy (3:12:20-21).

We have always grown up to see and respect every human regardless of position or title... (7:15:23-24).

Participants were resoundingly authentic and valued authenticity as an outcome of integrity, essential for trust and connection. They believed leaders must discover and embrace their true selves to support others effectively. This self-inclusion and behavioural integrity create a safe space for sharing diverse views and challenges (Wood, 2020, Younas *et al.*, 2020a; Olinover *et al.*, 2022). Empathy and humility were reiterated, and several participants highlighted passion as vital for fulfilling their responsibilities and inspiring others. These values were largely instilled by childhood role models. Notably, Malambe and

Toendepi (2023) identify passion as a trait of the ideal leader, but it is not explored within inclusive leadership literature.

Authenticity was a big part of my journey – finding the real me – if we are ok understanding ourselves, we will understand others better (12:24:34-35).

Values – empathy, compassion, EQ, self-awareness, being confident in who I am and how I show up and deliberate and intentional about bringing others into the circle (14:14:22-23).

EPIC – Excellence, passion, integrity, commitment – installed in me from little my parents said whatever you do, do it properly and if you are not passionate don't do it, integrity is so important after everything I have been through, ethical behaviour in the industry, commitment I am finisher (8:14:20-21).

Integrity – people talk about authenticity – but that starts with integrity... (23:23:27-28).

Integrity – I walk the talk, if I say something I follow through on what I said, I am very black and white. I am authentic, I am truly authentic to who I am – people know what I stand for. The authentic self is humble and empathetic. Empathetic with loads of maturity and Emotional Intelligence as well, so being authentic is probably the grounding and the biggest foundation for me as well. (6:18:25-26).

Respect was seen as a foundational value for creating spaces where everyone feels valued. Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) indicate that empathy, a component of EI, precedes respect. Every person is worthy of respect and honesty, and these are delivered through integrity, a precursor to authenticity that cultivates strong self-confidence. Participants also expressed a passion for meaningful work that solves real problems and a belief that everyone has something to offer. Leadership, they said, is called on to develop others, be a positive influence, build people up, and bring out their best.

4.3.10. Key values supporting participants' inclusive leadership style

The participants were then asked what values support their current leadership style in order to take note of any variations between values that supported their inclusive leadership journey and their current inclusive leadership style. Three key themes emerged (Table 21): intentionality, investing in others, and compassion.

Table 21: Key themes and sub-themes for key values supporting participants' inclusive leadership styles

Key themes	Sub-themes
Intentionality	Sincerity
	Openness, honesty and ethics
	Authenticity
Investing in others	Care for others
	Empathy
	Appreciation
Compassion	Courage

Participant one below said that creating an inclusive culture must be intentional; it is not about compliance or merely ensuring relevant documentation is in place. It is about intentionally creating inclusive spaces where others feel valued.

It was more that I didn't see (Inclusive Leadership) as a tick box – it had to be done meaningfully and intentionally. You don't just draft a policy – you have to feel it, practise it and see it in motion (1:21:29-30).

Inclusive leaders intentionally enable belonging through equity (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022).

Several participants emphasised the sincerity of one's intentionality, highlighting values that support it, including openness, honesty, ethics, and authenticity:

My word is my bond - when I have committed to someone, I don't go back on that - authenticity - what you see is what you get. I am open and honest and wear my heart on my sleeve, when you are believable you get buy in and people feel safe (11:20:28-29).

Transparency, honesty, openness, authenticity, show appreciation, high integrity – can be trusted, ethical behaviour, I can inspire them, inspiration, motivation. Ability to be the one that inspires them to do better and be better if they can (2:15:21-22).

Ethics – we work in Africa and we watch leaders doing well but not everything is about leaders doing right and leaders at the top focus on enriching themselves. What grounds me is being an ethical leader (6:19:27-28).

To achieve or do anything I must do it in love and I must be honest and respect others. Those values guide past, present and future (16:19:28-29).

Ethical leadership characterised by fairness, transparency, and integrity, contributes to creativity, innovation, psychological safety, and trust (Younas *et al.*, 2020a; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Creativity and innovation thrive in

supportive, respectful, and inclusive cultures led by caring, compassionate leaders (Jamshed & Majeed, 2019; Younas, 2020a).

Participants echoed the value of caring for and investing in others by showing empathy, understanding, and appreciating each person's contribution. They emphasised that while we are all different, our value is equal.

Care for others – genuinely wanting to help people – being confident in who I am and how I show up and embracing opportunities and make tough decisions – came with courage, experiences and relationships - I invest in relationships at work (14:17:26-27).

Same but more emphasis on empathy, a stronger emphasis on empathy, understanding and appreciating the contribution for each individual for who they are (18:22:31-32).

We are all equal – we are not the same but we are all equal – all of us have dreams and hopes (5:17:22-23).

Lastly, several participants mentioned leading with courage, kindness, compassion, and a belief in the goodness of humans. One participant believes kindness and compassion are key to people connecting with others as a leader, while another participant stated they rely most on courage and compassion.

You have to lead with kindness and be authentic otherwise people won't be interested (4:19:30-31).

Courage and compassion are what I rely on most (21:23:32-33).

The literature affirms kindness and compassion as key to building trust (Men *et al.*, 2020), and courage as an aspect of inclusive leadership (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Düger, 2019; Rehman *et al.*, 2019), but leaders' beliefs, such as a belief in human goodness, remain unexplored.

Overall, participants valued intentionality in how they were received in order to create environments where others felt valued. They demonstrated this through sincerity, openness, honesty, ethics, and authenticity. They value investing in and caring for others with empathy and appreciation, and they were kind, compassionate, and courageous.

4.3.11. One thing that most enabled the participants' journey to inclusive leadership

The participants were then asked what one thing most enabled the participants journey to inclusive leadership. Three key themes emerged (Table 22): personal responsibility, a growth mindset, and self-exploration.

Table 22: Key themes and sub-themes for the one thing that most enabled the participants' journey to inclusive leadership

Key themes	Sub-themes
Personal responsibility	Leave the world a better place
Growth mindset	Open to change
Self-exploration	Courage, care, kindness
	Self- and other-awareness
	Support
	Empathy
	Respect

When asked what most enabled their journey to inclusive leadership, personal responsibility to make the world a better place was highlighted. The participants largely had a growth mindset and were open to change and reframing their thinking, as illustrated by the quotes below:

Shedding light on injustices (18:24:34).

The most important thing is that I want to leave the world better than what I found it (16:22:32).

An opportunity that to be the change in the organisation (1:23:33).

A growth mindset is personal – see it as an opportunity – what can change if I do and if I don't – reframe ones thinking (18:26:36).

Change. Open to change (9:18:29).

The literature notes that inclusive leaders take responsibility (Younas *et al.*, 2020b), have a growth mindset (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024), and advocate for equity (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022), but their desire to improve the world is not made explicit.

Courage, care, and kindness were mentioned by several participants as key to enabling their journey to inclusive leadership. More importantly, participants highlighted self-exploration as critical for developing the behaviours that support

inclusive leadership. The following quotes from participants 19, 20, 12 and 10 illustrate the value and interconnectedness of self- and other-awareness:

The most enabling was understanding myself and who I am and what I wanted out of life and treated others how I wanted to be treated (19:22:32).

If we could all see and perceive the change within ourselves, we could all journey to inclusive leadership (20:16:26).

It is different for all people – depends on what we are here to learn – self-discovery has been the big one (12:28:41).

Self and other awareness (10:14:24).

As previously highlighted, while self-awareness and self-acceptance are discussed in the literature, their precursors, self-exploration and self-discovery, are insufficiently explored. Yarbrough (2023) advocates for leadership development through coaching and mentoring, but overlooks the role of sponsors and the importance of support.

Support emerged as a common theme noted in the transcripts, with many participants crediting sponsors, coaches, and mentors for shaping their leadership. Participant five, quoted below, singled out support as their key enabler:

I had a sponsor and mentor (5:18:24).

A gentleman... in terms of my career I really credit him – he took the time to seek me out because he was impressed with my work (5:19:25).

Empathy and respect, repeatedly emphasised throughout the semi-structured interviews, were highlighted by several participants as the primary factors supporting their journey to inclusive leadership. Empathy enables respect and is essential for transformative leadership (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). An awareness of the needs of others and a willingness to help is not determined by EI alone but is mediated by empathy and morality (Babić Čikeš & Tomašić Humer, 2023). Employees, in turn, role model their own behaviours on those demonstrated by leaders (Shaari *et al.*, 2015).

Participant 23, in the quotes below encapsulates this theme by role modelling empathy and respect to pave the way for the creating an environment that reflects these behaviours:

Empathy – I put myself in their shoes and thought how they would like to be treated (23:26:31).

Treat people with respect, the way you want to be treated, and empathy is critical – walk in the shoes of others and lead by example (23:27:32).

Treat people with respect, the way you want to be treated and empathy is critical – walk in the shoes of others and lead by example. Modelling the behaviours you want. I do a session with the leadership team on their behaviours and what that means. Visionary is articulating what you want to achieve and your role and that of others – model what being visionary means. Then you have 1000s of employees wanting to do things better than just 1 leader (23:27:32).

The one thing that most enabled the leaders' journey to leadership, and specifically to inclusive leadership, centred around personal responsibility, a growth mindset, and self-exploration.

The leaders were committed to making the world a better place, open to change, and demonstrated courage, kindness, empathy, and respect. They also advocated cultivating self- and other-awareness and recognised the value of support along their journey.

4.3.12. The participants' final advice to aspiring inclusive leaders

The participants were lastly asked if they had any final advice to aspiring inclusive leaders. Three key themes emerged (Table 23): openness to learning, self-reflection, and authenticity.

Table 23: Key themes and sub-themes for any final advice to aspiring inclusive leaders

Key themes	Sub-themes
Openness to learning	Vulnerability
	Mentors and mentees
Self-reflection	Self- and other-awareness
Authenticity	Compassion and empathy
	Humility
	Integrity
	Open and honest communication

The literature links inclusive leadership to learning (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023), but does not explore the connection between vulnerability and learning. Making oneself intentionally vulnerable for the purposes of learning was mentioned by several participants, including the value of being a mentor and mentee for continual learning and growth.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you have to have all the answers, the power of being an inclusive leader is that you have some answers and you may need others and you may not know and need to find someone to have the answers. Don't assume leaders have the answers. Be vulnerable – be comfortable saying I don't know, I can't, can you teach me, can you show me (6:22:31-32).

Appreciate the skills of learning because they will help you reposition yourself and iterate your thinking (13:92:149).

Always be a mentor and mentee you can always learn and grow (11:24:34).

(A)lways find a mentor to relate and learn from and assist in your journey (20:18:28-29).

Participants advocated continual self-reflection as a tool to learn, grow, and develop as well as a means to explore one's true nature, know who they are, and operate authentically while being aware of others. They noted that authenticity builds trust and shines as a guiding light for others to follow, helping them unlock their own authenticity (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Vladić *et al.*, 2021).

Always reflect on everything you do. Go back and look at decisions, don't judge, reflect and learn (8:18:26-27).

Be true to yourself and listen, be aware, awareness of your staffs' needs and dreams and mutual respect – respect is earned bit forced and lead by example (2:18-25-26).

Get to know yourself and be absolutely curious about what makes others tick and cross boundaries to understand others and stand in their shoes, ask for feedback and dream together and create imagination and dream and what life could look like – that common purpose and goal (10:16:26-27).

Be authentic and create the space for others to do the same, when you are authentic you give others permission to be authentic (7:18:29-30).

Being compassionate, humble, empathetic, and ethical was reiterated by several participants alongside the importance of ensuring others feel seen. Participant four, below, was emphatic about leading with kindness, humility, and empathy and about ensuring that others are not just listened to, but truly heard and seen.

I would tell them to lead with kindness, humility and empathy and ensure everyone is heard and seen and that the individuals feel heard and seen. You can listen but do they feel heard and seen (4:21:33-35).

Several participants highlighted the value of open and honest communication, the courage to challenge what does not align, and the importance of role modelling this for others by having difficult conversations. Vukadinović (2022), notes empathy as key to facilitating constructive, rather than punitive, feedback.

Participant 16 captures these sentiments below:

If they could just respect people's views and honest in their views. Most people do lip service – they don't share opinions and views and feelings. People can see when you are not consistent and will dismiss your advice. If you want to be a leader you must be a good listener and honest with your views and not pay lip service. Be authentic (16:24:34-35).

Inclusive leadership thrives on the courage to speak out, the vulnerability to learn continuously, the commitment to mentor and be mentored, and the authenticity gained through self-reflection to lead with humility and unwavering values, specifically compassion, empathy, and integrity. These principles not only guide individual growth but also inspires others to grow.

4.3.13. Results discussion conclusion

Many participant beliefs, values, and skills stemmed from introspection on personal and lived experiences, which fuelled a responsibility to create empathetic and empowering environments. While Wood (2020) recognises inner healing, the literature inadequately addresses how early exposure to disadvantage, diversity, career challenges, personal experiences, and role models shape the beliefs, values, behaviours, and skills that support inclusive leadership. Similarly, Malik (2023), highlights curiosity as key for inclusive leaders

but does not examine it as an innate characteristic. Malambe and Toendepi (2023), identify passion as an ideal leaders' trait, yet it remains unaddressed in inclusive leadership studies.

The literature shows inclusive leaders champion justice, fairness, and equity, creating inclusive cultures focused on equality (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Yikilmaz, 2023), but it overlooks solidarity, the belief in solving inequality through unity. Participants strongly believe everyone matters, the world should be fair and equitable, and strength comes from our interconnectedness.

They hold an abundance mindset, trusting that everyone has talent and purpose. While literature links inclusive leaders and inclusive organisational brand cultures to increased innovation by tapping into individual potential (Randel, 2023), it neglects the role a leader's beliefs play, the belief in each person's human potential, purpose, and inherent goodness. Nor does the literature centre their desire for equality on a world stage. Several participants highlighted faith as essential to the belief systems that support inclusive leadership principles and practises, a view echoed by others but absent from the literature.

Several participants linked self-worth to upholding the principles and practises of inclusive leadership. While Lu *et al.* (2022) link Emotional Intelligence (EI) to better self-acceptance, the literature does not specifically address the role of self-worth. Similarly, although self-awareness and self-acceptance are discussed, their precursors, self-exploration and self-discovery, are underexplored yet frequently mentioned by participants as vital to inclusive leadership. Participants also mentioned the role of sponsors and the importance of support. Though Yarbrough (2023) supports leadership development through coaching and mentoring, sponsors and support are overlooked.

The key differential between the participants' journey to leadership and inclusive leadership, was empathy. They linked empathy to inclusion, using the terms almost interchangeably, and saw it as the catalyst for empowering others.

Empathy, a component of EI, is essential for connecting, collaborating, openness to learning, creating psychologically safe spaces where individuals feel seen and heard, and enabling authentic contributions (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023). It involves suspending personal beliefs, actively listening (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021), and understanding others' perspectives and emotions (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Participants combined curiosity and cultural awareness with advanced communication and listening skills to empower others through empathy.

Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) found that empathy precedes respect. Empathy enables respect and is vital for transformative leadership (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Participants believed that everyone, regardless of title or background, deserves respect, including respect for others' time. Inclusive leaders focus on followers, showing respect and timely appreciation (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023). Respect is foundational for creating environments where everyone feels valued. Participants believed that respect is delivered through integrity, a precursor to authenticity.

Authenticity emerged as the most frequently emphasised behaviour underlying key themes. Empathy without authenticity can lead to hollow platitudes, while authenticity without empathy may come across as harsh. Together, they support psychological safety, enabling leaders to address matters honestly while respecting others' emotions and perspectives. Participants were deeply committed to staying true to themselves and modelling authenticity in leadership to create an environment where others feel safe, seen, and empowered. They valued authenticity as a result of integrity, essential for trust and connection, believing leaders must embrace their true selves to effectively support others in embracing theirs (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Vladić *et al.*, 2021). These values were often shaped by childhood role models.

Lastly, several participants highlighted intentional vulnerability, realised through authenticity, as vital for learning, including the importance of being both mentor and mentee. While the literature links inclusive leadership to learning (Korkmaz

et al., 2022; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023), it overlooks the connection between authenticity, vulnerability, and learning. Participants advocated continual self-reflection to grow, develop, and explore their true nature, enabling them to operate authentically, empathically, and respectfully.

In conclusion, empathy emerged as the foundational theme linking inclusive leadership and practises aimed at creating inclusive environments. However, the literature lacks sufficient exploration of empathy's precursors, and its contextualisation through empathetic practises, despite its foundational role in supporting inclusive environments. There is a need to more deeply understand empathy, to develop guidance for leaders without similar personal and lived experiences, and inherent traits or beliefs.

4.4. EXPLORING THE KEY INTERVIEW THEMES

Using Atlas.ti for qualitative data analysis enabled a comprehensive exploration of the emerging themes from the interview responses. The transcripts were systematically coded based on the research objectives, facilitating an organised identification of key patterns.

A visual representation of these key patterns and emergent themes was then developed (Figure 10), illustrating their relationships and connections. This visual representation was compared and examined in relation to both the conceptual framework and the existing literature, ensuring a thorough contextual understanding of the findings. The researcher also established specific questions and coding categories during this process to further guide analysis and interpretations.

The following questions and code categories were created by the researcher:

4.4.1. What factors mediate the emergence of inclusion in an organisational brand leader? Code category: Factors mediating

4.4.2. What supporting behaviours are crucial for inclusive organisational brand leadership? Code category: Supporting behaviours

4.4.3. What specific skills contribute to inclusive organisational brand leadership? Code category: Skills for inclusion

The research questions and codes categories were run through the interview transcripts: 66 code categories and 3 118 codes emerged. The data was reviewed and exported to Excel for exploration.

The themes that emerged from the exploration (Figure 10) include: promoting a sense of belonging in others; role modelling behaviours that empower and inspire; building trust and connection; and the influence of personal experiences, challenges, and mentors.

Of the themes that emerged, the most insightful was the role of personal experiences, challenges, and mentors in cultivating the skills and values that support inclusion.

Among the skills and values mentioned, the most noteworthy with regards to repetition, was empathy followed by skills and values that support human connection including authenticity, listening, and learning through self-reflection and adaptation.

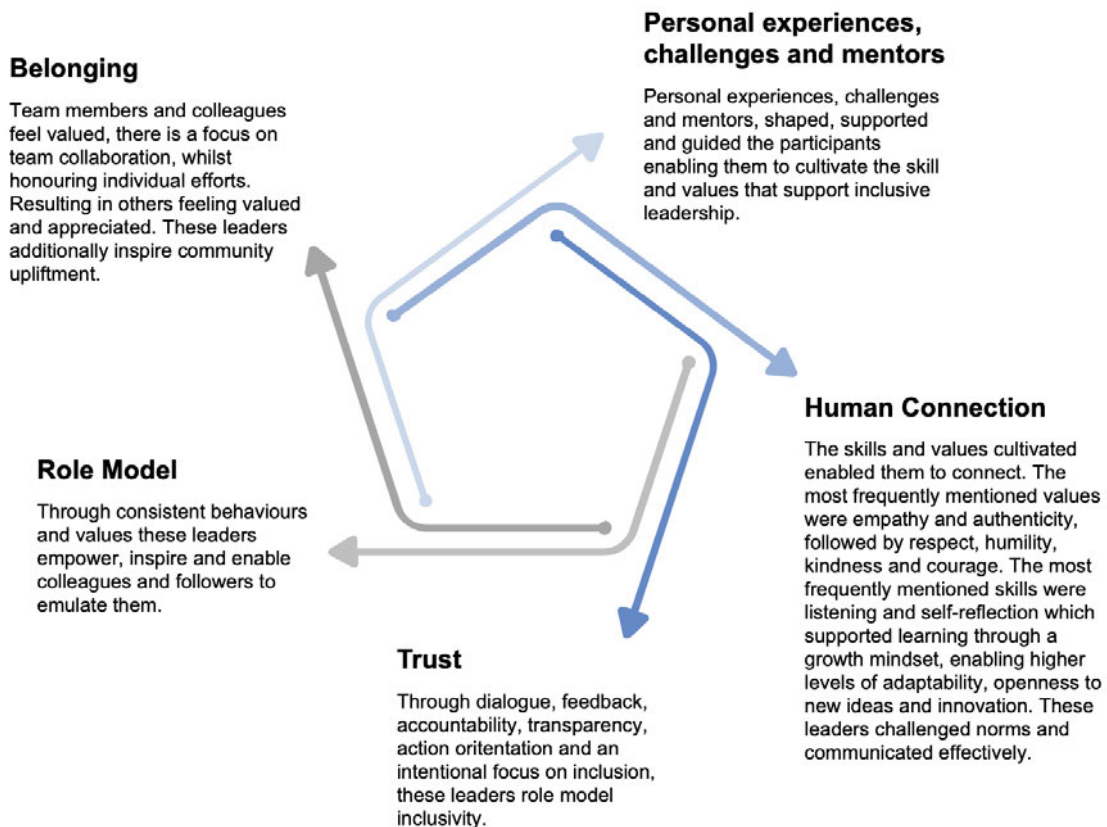


Figure 10: Themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews (Constructed by researcher)

These emergent themes illustrate that inclusive leadership is a dynamic integration of personal beliefs and values, embodied experience, intentional practices, and ongoing development, all aimed at cultivating environments where every individual feels valued and empowered and that empathy within this context needs to be explored.

In conclusion, inclusive leadership centres on cultivating empathy, establishing and building upon genuine relationships, and creating a culture where individuals feel respected and empowered to share unique perspectives (Marathe *et al.*, 2017; Praveenadevi & Girmurugan, 2019; Mehmood *et al.*, 2021; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). Although the literature affirms empathy's value, it inadequately contextualise it as a practical guide for inclusive leadership, underscoring the importance of exploring empathy through both participant insights and theoretical perspectives. To meet these new demands of organisational brand leadership, organisational brand leaders must cultivate heightened levels of inner awareness

or Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a precursor to accepting the world through the lens of another (Thompson, 2010; Randel, 2023). Floricica and Tasente (2022) describe the acceptance of self, the environment, and others (inclusion) as a force for change.

4.5. EXPLORING EMPATHY

Empathy is widely recognised as a core component of inclusion, not only as a precursor to inclusive practice, but as a defining trait of inclusive leadership. This is consistently supported in the literature and reflected in the interview data, as indicated by Participant 18 below. As such, it is of value to further explore empathy.

Empathy stands out, it is the essence and fibre of my being, it is a key strength of mine as part of my inclusive leadership style (18:4:6-7).

I learnt empathy at a young age and saw the struggles that people had. My parents, both of them, we took in kids from rural areas – you have to give back – you have more than you need. To grow you share and that is the way the world works – you get back what you give and sometimes more (23:4:4-5).

Empathy was more thoroughly explored by reviewing the three code categories, created by analysing the text contained in the interview transcripts, and categorising the text into codes, and then into code categories. This analysis was supported by filtering the prominence of the various codes contained in each code category.

The Factors mediating inclusion were assessed across the code categories (Table 24). Factors refer to the various elements that influence the cultivation of inclusion within an individual. Of the Factors mediating inclusion, empathy emerged as the dominant one, followed by authenticity, and respect.

Table 24: Factors mediating inclusion

Factors mediating inclusion ranked by prominence
Empathy
Authenticity
Respect
Inclusive Leadership
Understanding
Values
Beliefs
Inclusion
Courage
Collaboration

The Skills for inclusion were assessed across the code categories (Table 25). Skills for inclusion refer to the abilities one possesses to value difference, and to create a sense of belonging and empowerment for all. Of the Skills for inclusion, empathy emerged as the dominant one, followed by communication, and adaptability.

Table 25: Skills for inclusion

Skills for inclusion ranked by prominence
Empathy
Communication
Adaptability
Self-awareness
Understanding
Authenticity
Collaboration
Active Listening
Empowerment
Resilience

The supporting behaviours of inclusion were assessed across the code categories (Table 26). Supporting behaviours of inclusion are behaviours that actively cultivate an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued. A behaviour repeated with consistency contributes to the creation of a skill. Of the supporting behaviours of inclusion, empathy emerged as the dominant one, followed by authenticity, and collaboration.

Table 26: Supporting behaviours of inclusion

Supporting behaviours of inclusion ranked by prominence
Empathy
Authenticity
Collaboration
Listening
Understanding
Respect
Courage
Active Listening
Openness
Support

Empathy dominated across all three categories. Even though empathy is a core value, the exploration thereof indicates that the construct needs to be understood in context.

The participants journey to acquiring empathy generally centred around three key elements: personal experiences and mentorship, beliefs and values, and cultural exposure.

The exposure to diverse experiences and environments, including the influence of family and mentors, played a key role in moulding the participants capacity for empathy. Also, contributing to this moulding were personal challenges such as navigating biases and overcoming low self-worth.

To cultivate an empathetic mindset, the participants held a foundational belief in human potential and how important it was to treat all human beings with respect. Additional values that were mentioned as key, included: authenticity, kindness, and integrity.

The final element that was mentioned as a contributing precursor to empathy was the importance of cultural exposure, to actively engage with different cultures. This engagement increases the understanding of, and sensitivity to, the perspectives of others, which is vital to the development of empathy.

Once the conditions have been created for the cultivation of empathy as previously stated, the participants then actively support their empathetic mindset and demonstration thereof through: active listening and communication, the

creation of safe spaces, continuous learning and self-reflection, and lastly through inclusive leadership practices.

Being able to connect with others through empathetic interactions requires the utilisation of skills centred around active listening, symmetrical communication, and sensitivity to emotions.

These leaders create environments where others not only feel safe to express their perspectives, but where open dialogue is encouraged, promoting empathy. Psychological safety is not just an outcome; it is actively pursued.

A critical component of this approach is a commitment to continuous learning and self-reflection. Self-reflective leaders actively seek feedback to better understand how they come across, to gain insight into their potential biases, and to improve their empathetic responses based on feedback and reflection. These leaders have mostly embraced vulnerability as an enabler of open dialogue and thus an aspect of nurturing empathy.

These leaders support empathy through inclusive leadership practices or behaviours that prioritise respect, fairness, and collaboration. These practices or behaviours naturally promote an organisational culture that is empathetic.

Key insights gained from exploring the prominence of empathy across participant demographics:

1. Skills for inclusion: the most common code category was empathy as a skill for inclusion
2. Consistency of empathy: of the 23 participants interviewed, only one participant did not have empathy under the three code categories reviewed.
3. Sequence of empathy: different aspects of empathy were observed more strongly at certain ages and could be sequential, requiring further research.

4. Data relevancy: the 2024 award year had the highest average placement in Factors mediating inclusion category. In both the Skills for inclusion and the Supporting behaviours categories, the 2024 award year had the highest placement. This could indicate that empathy is becoming increasingly more observed over time, but verifying this would require further research.
5. Multinationals and nationals: multinational companies show a higher placement across the Skills for inclusion and Supporting behaviours code categories, with national companies presenting with a higher placement for the Factors mediating inclusion. One possible explanation is that multinational companies, being more multicultural, tend to place greater emphasis on cultivating inclusive cultures. In contrast, national companies, shaped by South Africa's historical context, may have experienced greater exposure to adversity, which could account for the higher group rating in the Factors mediating inclusion category. Any observations noted require further research.
6. Ethnic groups: the White ethnic group scores the lowest overall, including within the individual categories. The Indian ethnic group had the highest placement in Factors mediating inclusion, and Skills for inclusion category, but not in the Supporting behaviours category. The Coloured ethnic group has the highest placement in the Supporting behaviours category. Of the three code categories the Black ethnicity group had its highest placement in the Skills for inclusion code category. This could imply that the White ethnic group may need more support in cultivating empathy, and would be an area of further research.
7. Genders: the female gender group placed significantly higher than the male gender group. The only code category where the female gender group placed marginally higher versus significantly higher than the male gender group is within the Skills for inclusion category. This could imply

that the male gender group may need more support in cultivating empathy, and presents an opportunity for further research.

8. Regions: the highest average placement comes from the KwaZulu-Natal region. Whilst the Skills for inclusion category appears evenly spread across the metros, KwaZulu-Natal dominates the Factors mediating inclusion code category, and shares the highest average placement with the Western Cape for the Supporting behaviours of empathy. This may be due to the challenges the KwaZulu-Natal region has faced, including floods and riots, or the history of the region as a unified kingdom of the Zulus under Shaka Zulu. This would be a subject for further research and serve to support the greater adoption of inclusion and empathy in all regions.
9. Titles: of the five titles that had the highest average placement in the individual code categories, one dominated the Factors mediating inclusion category (Senior Manager for Talent Management and Organisational Development), one dominated the Skills for inclusion category (Chairman), and three titles dominated the Supporting behaviours of empathy category (Director of Human Resources, Head of Corporate Affairs, and CEO). A leader's job function and job level may influence their ability to empathise. Functions that are more stakeholder focused appeared to place higher. Supporting behaviours are higher within relevant senior level roles, whereas the Skills for inclusion are higher in executive roles and Factors mediating inclusion are largely personal. More research would be required to validate these claims.
10. Sectors: the highest number of inclusive leader awards were given within the Financial Services sector, followed by the Management Consulting sector. Additionally, the highest category averages per industry were found in the Energy and Chemicals sector, the Food Manufacturing industry, the Industrial Technology industry, and the

Maritime and Defence industry, with the former three exhibiting greater prominence within the Skills for inclusion category. The Retail industry demonstrates prominence in the Supporting behaviours of empathy category, although this trend is not mirrored in the other two code categories. Inherently people-focused sectors may influence levels of inclusion and empathy. As these insights are in no way conclusive, further research is required to validate them.

In conclusion, and notwithstanding further areas for research, empathy was identified as a key quality by all but one participant. This was confirmed as a key aspect of inclusion through both the literature and thematic analysis. While empathy is a core value of an inclusive leader, it encompasses more than just empathy itself.

An empathetic mindset results from three components: precursors to being empathetic, supporters of empathy, and empathetic practices. All three are essential to cultivating an empathetic mindset, which is central to inclusive leadership. A significant contribution of this study is the creation of the Inclusive Empathy Model by the researcher, based on the research findings.

4.6. THE INCLUSIVE EMPATHY MODEL

The Inclusive Empathy Model (Figure 11) is a visual representation of the earlier contextualisation of empathy derived from the interview transcripts.

Given the importance of empathy in relation to inclusive leadership, it is valuable to explore each aspect of the Inclusive Empathy Model in greater depth, considering both the participant quotes and the literature.

This exploration incorporates a synthesis of the literature and the interview transcripts and may result in some content duplication. This serves the purposes of providing a thorough guide for leaders seeking to cultivate a more inclusive organisational brand leadership style, fulfilling the aim of this study to offer such guidance.

Current organisational brand leaders lack sufficient direction in integrating inclusion within their leadership style, and developing the necessary skills and behaviours to lead effectively in solving complex challenges through stakeholder-centric innovation.

Although the existing literature highlights the value of empathy, it does not adequately contextualise empathy in a way that serves as a guide for inclusive leadership. The Inclusive Empathy Model, therefore, addresses this gap in the literature making this model a significant contribution.

Focus will be given to Empathetic practices, as the document category analysis revealed that the Skills for inclusion category was the most frequently occurring code, and thus most important to aspiring inclusive organisational brand leaders.

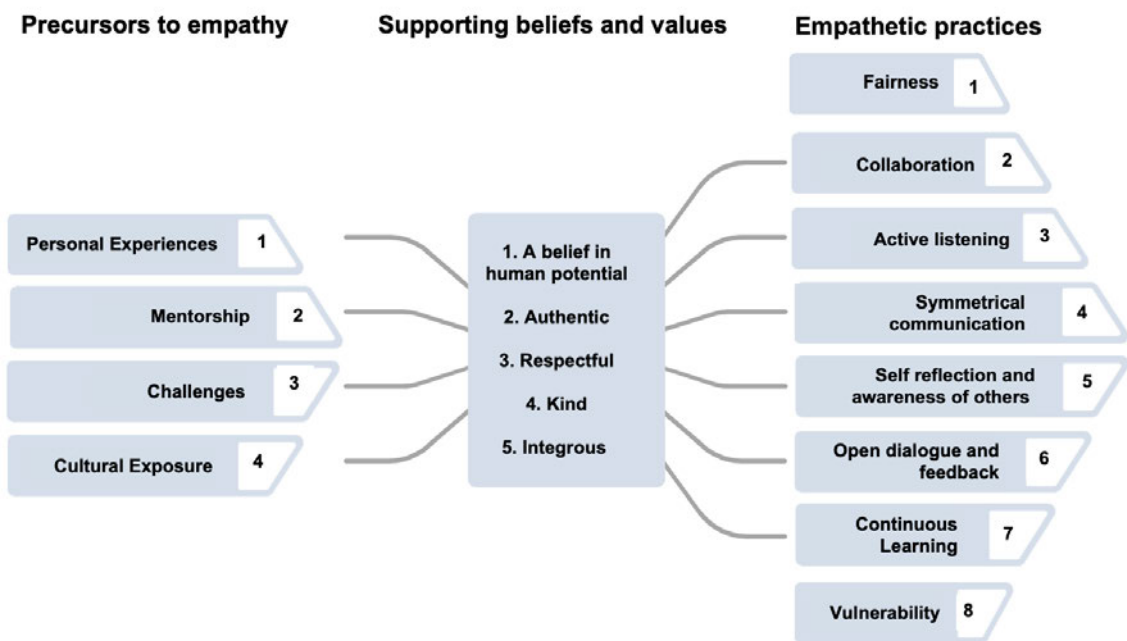


Figure 11: Inclusive empathy model (Constructed by researcher)

Each element of the Inclusive Empathy Model illustrated in Figure 11 will be elaborated on in the following section, referencing both the literature as well as the participant quotes relating to that element.

4.6.1. Precursors to empathy

The Inclusive Empathy Model lists four precursors to the beliefs and values that support empathetic practises, personal experiences, mentorship, challenges, and cultural exposure. Each of these four elements will be discussed in the following section.

4.6.1.1. Personal experiences

The personal experiences of participants often evolved around either having experienced loss or disadvantages at a young age, or being exposed intimately to others who were disadvantaged.

I came from the other side of the tracks... they came from privilege... they didn't know the view from there (1:4:5).

I learnt empathy at a young age and saw the struggles that people had (23:4:4-5).

Personal experiences commenced: at home, in school, and in their early careers where they took on roles that cultivated the skills essential to leading such as problem-solving, communication, and empathy.

Our personal experiences develop us into the person we are today. The sense that – we learn from experience throughout our journey – what you don't want to be and see (2:3:4).

I also learnt inclusion from disabilities as she (my mother) worked with learners with special needs and she pushed us to get involved in school – playing with the kids and getting them to help with certain concepts like pronouncing their names (5:5:6-7).

She was a servant leader in community and church, and she was my role model (14:1:1-2).

(L)earnings that emerged from personal experiences in the workplace and in society in general which created in me a desire to be someone who is inclusive in my thoughts, words, and in my actions (22:30:47).

I am brave enough to take uncomfortable feedback. I took the feedback. I needed this horrible episode to happen (6:4:5).

Our response, especially to challenging personal experiences, determines whether we cultivate skills as a result of these experiences or not. This aligns with

the findings of AlSaied and Alkhoraif (2024) and Malambe and Toendepi (2023) that innovation is enhanced by a growth mindset, learning through experience, and the understanding that leaders are made, not born, and are developed through training, experience, education, and personal mastery. The leaders interviewed chose to learn from their challenging personal experiences and, as a result, cultivated new skills.

4.6.1.2. Mentorship

Participant learning did not stop at personal experiences. Several participants mentioned mentors, sponsors and coaches, who not only guided but supported their development.

I had a sponsor and mentor... (5:18:24).

A lot of the leaders who inspired me and opened doors were men and continue to coach me to today (7:3:4).

(W)orking with my coach who has been critical to my journey and remaining grounded (7:10:14-15).

I had very good mentors... On the one side I had male mentors – very supportive of anything I have done... I learnt so much (8:3:4).

These mentors were not only focused on their personal and professional development but also provided them with invaluable direct feedback that offered insight into themselves and others, enabling them to learn and grow. This, in turn, cultivated a desire within them to empower others to develop their own leadership abilities. This mirrors the findings of Shaari *et al.* (2015), that employee behaviour is reinforced through leadership guidance and mentorship, and indicates the reiterative nature of mentorship. When a leader is mentored, they subsequently mentor others.

...I need to understand my responsibility in ruling and leading – I can empower or disempower (5:19:25).

I was a graduate trainee... (my) mentor was the CEO... a lot of my leadership was inspired by him, he really made sure we were exposed, mentored and coached, he saw dormant ability for me... (7:1:1-2).

(M)y manager saw something and placed me in the role and mentored me – he was a good guide (19:2:3).

To improve their style of leadership, leaders require skills, and those skills can come from personal experience or trainers, coaches, and mentors. Lasrado and Kassem (2021) confirm that training and coaching are effective methods of acquiring leadership skills.

(She) is a very good leader and we need to move her (me) to great; the company then invested in my development through coaching (6:2:3).

Participants exposed to mentors realised the value of mentorship, support their employees receiving access to mentorship, and strongly advocate that aspiring inclusive leaders seek out mentors. They additionally viewed mentorship as ongoing and not episodic, that learning through mentors is a continual process.

I will take money to develop others. I set money aside to do executive coaching as I have seen what it did for me, and I support others with access to it (6:12:15-16).

Now I have a mentor and coaches helping me... they stretch you out and challenge you (9:20:31).

From parents, teachers, reading - the greats, Steve Covey, Scott M Peck, Ghandi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, mentors (10:9:15-16).

Always be a mentor and mentee, you can always learn and grow, (especially when navigating challenges) (11:24:34).

(A)lways find a mentor to relate and learn from and assist in your journey (20:18:28-29).

There is a call from participants to not only normalise leadership development, but to do so proactively, to equip leaders and aspiring leaders with the skills they need to transition from traditional control-and-command leadership styles to more empowering and inclusive approaches. Yarbrough (2023) confirms that coaching and mentoring support leadership development. Lauer (2018), Düger (2019) and Rehman *et al.* (2019) indicate that not only does coaching and mentoring support leadership development, but that it can additionally align employees with a brand's story and values to more effectively deliver on a brand's promise.

4.6.1.3. Challenges

Leaders not only learnt leadership skills through personal experience and mentors, but also by navigating challenges related to various biases when transitioning into leadership roles. This further cultivated within them a desire to intentionally create inclusive spaces and embed inclusion into organisational cultures.

...I had a lot of challenges (8:3:4). All challenges helped me and made me strong – still have lots to learn (8:7:6-7).

My mom said have a conversation and (that) was the scariest thing I did ever... (He) never disrespected me again or screamed at me again. It was a complete turnaround. It was really scary and I was young. You have to face those challenges in the moment (11:4:4-5).

The learning curve was steep, and there I encountered various challenges, each of which I accepted as an opportunity to learn, grow and contribute to the organisation as best I could (22:3:5).

What was evident from the participants was not the challenges themselves, but how those challenges were perceived and navigated. The participants demonstrated a resilient mindset when facing difficulties, which aligns with the findings of Younas *et al.* (2020a). They viewed challenges as opportunities and did not seem constrained by the fear of failure. As observed by Unas *et al.* (2020a) and Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), this openness to challenges also fosters greater creativity and innovation. It is not the challenges we face, but the stories we tell ourselves about those challenges and how we respond that determine how we learn and grow.

When you always have to work hard and the odds are against you and you work so hard.... That's when the passion started, so many people have the same challenges and don't persevere (1:8:10).

You become resilient with mindset – how you view challenges – to choose to stand up and try again and learn something and believe in self to overcome and through lived experience and upbringing. I am going to learn something from setback instead of giving up (14:19:29-31).

...I had to persevere to know that someday I would have a child looking up to me with their challenges and if I didn't then how would I teach them perseverance (19:4:19).

Some participants mentioned the role of faith in supporting them to overcome challenges.

So for me, loving and accepting myself and being grounded in my faith and my humility is the starting point to anything (6:21:30).

Faith over fear... I am deeply spiritual – it is at the core of me. Stepping onto the stage at the GMA. Putting that giant into prayer – I can do all things and pushing through that fear – not giving myself opportunity to say no to things that overwhelm me – having courage. Mom and spirituality (14:5:7).

My faith I lean on a lot and go with my gut a lot (15:18:23-25).

Faith helps you cope with challenges and tragic experience (18:19:26).

The participants' relationship to challenges was consistent, with challenges being viewed as opportunities to problem solve, which is reminiscent of Čikeš and Humer's (2023) findings that this perspective has a causal relationship with prosocial behaviour. Prosocial behaviours involve being aware of others' needs and aiming to help them meet those needs. Babić Čikeš and Tomašić Humer (2023) further confirm that empathy serves as the mediator in the process.

Through the journey you have challenges and picking yourself up and building the resilience muscle and keep going and see when others struggle and be more inclusive and actively listen... (15:18:23-24).

This resilient approach to challenges, along with the ability to see challenges as opportunities, supported the participants' transition to inclusion. According to Malik (2023), this perspective generates curiosity and openness, which serve as a bridge to inclusion.

4.6.1.4. Cultural Exposure

Inclusive leadership, therefore, is a skill that can be acquired through a shift in perspective. Yikilmaz (2023) confirms this, while Malik (2023) identifies not only curiosity and openness as behavioural traits which serve as a bridge to inclusion, but also cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence refers to the awareness that not everyone shares the same norms and values. The participants viewed this awareness of and respect for cultural diversity and difference positively. This

perspective is echoed in the literature, particularly in the work of Shore *et al.* (2018) and Korkmaz *et al.* (2022).

Many of the participants interviewed demonstrated an exposure to diverse cultures, either during their: childhood, student or early career years, and cited this early exposure as a key milestone in their journey to inclusive leadership. This cultivated within them the cultural intelligence required to engage more effectively with diversity, and create inclusive spaces where diverse cultures can collaborate and thrive.

All the roles I experienced even if they didn't have people reporting to me – I always had to negotiate and influence – across markets (3:1:1-2).

The diversity of roles I fulfilled in very different countries and cities... you have to adapt very quickly to other cultures and environments. Having that experience in very different cultural spaces (3:2:3-4).

I was exposed to (m)ulti-generational meetings where you found people included from multiple generations (5:5:6-7).

...I got to work with cultures that are so different – Russia, Turkey, Middle East, Nigeria. The importance of including and taking people on a journey with you and leveraging our differences to be a strength and not divide us (7:5:7).

Cultural intelligence (is key) – in different countries I need to understand the cultures. I have learnt so much about different cultures and what to say and not and collaboration is key (8:8:8-9).

(W)orking with diverse teams (was a milestone in my inclusive leadership journey). ...I worked in the mines with black African miners (10:2:3-4).

(H)aving lived in so many different countries exposed me to appreciate just from a behaviour perspective, I don't see race. I see contributions and the reason is because I've lived in those areas. I've lived in India, I've lived in America, I've lived in, you know, Norway (13:26:39-40).

(I)t never came naturally I had to work on it and working across cultures and diversity and being able to resonate with life journeys... (14:10:14-15).

We see things differently because of culture, race, etc. – I want to break barriers so people can find each other to make SA and the world a better place. I have lived with all these groups – youth, elders, women, young men, Blacks, Chinese, Whites. I have spent time with

them – visited their countries and I have realised that every human wants the best for themselves and their community... (16:1:15).

We grew up on a farm in Rustenburg – I was exposed to all races – I was exposed to farm workers – my parents never taught us to see race and gender – and to embrace all humans (19:10:13).

It was a culture shock and huge learning curve and opportunity. I was the first person of Indian origin... I looked different to what they were accustomed to. (22:6:8-9).

The participants held a consistent belief that everyone is of value, and that key to extracting that value is cultural intelligence through cultural exposure and cultural curiosity.

I am inquisitive about different cultures and religions – to me it is very interesting. You cannot be inclusive without understanding other people's cultures and belief and what other people are like, to be sensitive if a Hindu has a prayer to go to that you cannot judge them for that. It is an open conversation, mutual respect for differences, not just me to them, but my boundaries, beliefs and culture. (2:4:5-6).

(B)eing emotionally and culturally intelligent which is important to foster inclusion and the ability to empower others and enable them to be seen and noticed (4:12:19-20).

The value of inclusion – everyone has something to offer (5:14:21).

There is no part of our transformation journey that isn't relevant – everyone is of value. This is my bravest work I have done... bringing together rather than dividing, take them with on the journey (7:6:8).

Cultural intelligence (is key) because you need to be aware of what to change. (T)o listen to understand then respond. With cultural diversity that is key – active listening (8:9:10-11).

(Y)ou need to read in different countries before you come back to change the ideals of why we failed in Africa. Move around, read a lot, absorb a lot and sit amongst people who have got a much different culture perspective to what we see in South Africa (13:11:20).

I am consistent about understanding culture and cultural beliefs. As a new member I wanted to be clear on their culture, beliefs and expectations so we don't overstep boundaries and treat people the same (19:12:16-17).

This cultural inclusion demonstrated by participants supports environments where richer ideas emerge, a finding supported by Vladić *et al.* (2021). As noted by

Korkmaz *et al.* (2022), cultural inclusion optimises innovation that reflects this ethos and serves all stakeholders.

James (2016) describes cultural inclusion as an evolved way of being. Drawing on Dr Clare Graves' value levels, he suggests that individuals and organisations operating at this level are guided by a higher set of beliefs and values.

4.6.2. Supporting beliefs and values

The Inclusive Empathy Model illustrates five beliefs and values that support empathetic practises: a belief in human potential, authenticity, respect, kindness, and integrity. Each of these five elements will be discussed in the following section.

4.6.2.1. A belief in human potential

Participant 22 articulated that a belief in human potential means that untapped potential resides in every human, and that together we can do more. This was echoed by Participants seven and two.

(T)alent is dispersed equally and opportunity is not, but given opportunity, people will rise (7:14:21-22).

I therefore commit to developing them as much as I can and giving feedback. I want them to be the best version of themselves. That is my passion – I want to know my team has succeeded because they can continue to do their jobs and continue growing by me installing a culture of learning. I want them to realise their potential (2:8:11).

Many of the participants worked with leaders who saw potential in them, and this inspired them to recognise and develop the potential in their own team members and direct reports, thereby replicating what they themselves had received. This aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that behaviours are acquired through observation (Shaari *et al.*, 2015; Younas *et al.*, 2020a). Saputra (2021) referenced role modelling as a key aspect of leadership, describing leadership as a pattern of behaviour used to influence, direct, and motivate potential within a team towards a vision, largely through role modelling.

Continued self-development and a belief in human potential... (is key to inclusive leadership) (10:10:17-18).

I saw leaders who saw the potential in me and that's how I grew in those milestones and seeing what I could achieve in a team and seeing what they could achieve (14:3:4).

We find ways to teach others skills and potential (17:12:17-18).

To involve and include everyone and validate their self-worth and bring into a positive light their strength, contribution and potential... (18:3:4-5).

Collaborative, flexible, fair, transparent, or authentic workplaces enable employees to participate fully, accessing their potential within a trust-based environment where they are treated fairly, valued as individuals, their achievements recognised, and their ideas and perspectives heard. As noted by Shaari *et al.* (2015), Younas *et al.* (2020a) and Randel (2023), these employees contribute more strategically to organisations, are more innovative, and have greater confidence in their creative potential, thereby accessing increasing levels of human potential over time.

4.6.2.2. Authentic

Authenticity was viewed by participants as an enabler of human connection, increasing the influence a leader has over followers. Authenticity, considered a key trait of inclusive leadership by participants, needed to be demonstrated through consistent actions, decisions, and values.

Authenticity is the biggest thing, I don't play games, I am open and honest... (11:11:14-15).

Authenticity is a critical value as an Inclusive Leader and I try model that as far as possible (18:4:6-7).

Being a leader that is true to oneself was viewed as an enabler for others to be true to themselves, as well as an enhancer of trust, a key component in unlocking human potential. As observed by Younas *et al.* (2020a), Vladić *et al.* (2021) and Olinover *et al.* (2022), this act creates a safe space that welcomes open communication thereby enabling the sharing of views, fears and challenges, essential for creativity and innovation.

Be authentic and create the space for others to do the same, when you are authentic you give others permission to be authentic (7:18:29-30).

Your authenticity will be a beacon of light so that others can shine their light (18:28:38-39).

Authenticity helps you be consistent... I am consistent about understanding culture and cultural beliefs... People look at you with a microscope in leadership – I am conscious and mindful about what I stand for and display that consistently (19:12:16-17).

I don't want to be anything other than who I am. Authenticity is a critical value as an Inclusive Leader... (18:4:6-7).

And authenticity – what you see is what you get (19:19:27-28).

Authenticity – what you see is what you get. I am open and honest and wear heart on sleeve, when you are believable you get buy in and people feel safe (11:20:28-29).

I am just myself, authentic... (20:14:23-24).

Authentic leadership, according to Schaap and Dippenaar (2017) and Hameli and Ordun (2022), can be developed through training and coaching focused on Emotional Intelligence (EI). More specifically, Ferdman and Deane (2014) emphasise that self-awareness, a key component of EI, supports the development of a leader's authenticity. The participants interviewed demonstrated high levels of self-awareness.

Authenticity – big part of my journey – finding the real me – if we are ok understanding ourselves, we will understand others better (12:23:33).

Knowing that sense of self-awareness – playing to strengths, leaning into development areas, facing fear, being courageous when I needed to (14:5:7).

Values – empathy, compassion, EQ, self-awareness, being confident in who I am and how I show up and deliberate and intentional about bringing others into the circle (14:14:22-23).

(P)art of being authentic is being yourself (15:17:22)

Their self-awareness was demonstrated through the open and honest communication of their thoughts and feelings. As noted by Ferdman and Deane (2014) and Vladić *et al.* (2021), authentic communication significantly influences employee engagement and innovation.

Authenticity is the biggest thing, I don't play games, I am open and honest... (11:11:14-15).

If you want to be a leader, you must be a good listener and honest with your views and not pay lip service. Be authentic (16:24:34-35).

Some participants mentioned uncovering hidden parts of themselves as part of their journey to authenticity. Mate and Mate (2022) refer to these hidden parts of oneself as attachments that hinder authenticity. Wood (2020) confirms that, for leaders to create environments where stakeholder-centric innovation naturally flourishes, they must first focus on inner healing, beginning with the development of EI, mindfulness and self-awareness. Malambe and Toendepi (2023) describe this as personal mastery, which is acquired through the awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, values, and aspirations, as well as how they impact on others.

(Y)ou are not authentic if you hide parts of yourself (1:27:38).

Mindfulness practise, spending time with myself and reflecting on my journey and taking on board feedback on how others receive and see me. Knowing that sense of self-awareness – playing to strengths, leaning into development areas, facing fear, being courageous when I needed to (14:5:7).

The behaviours we encourage is mindfulness – your surroundings, how you articulate yourself (19:11:14-15).

Mindfulness comes with knowing who you are and what you stand for. It's not thinking you are the best – you are constantly learning (19:13:18).

Their authenticity derived from self-acceptance or self-inclusion, enabled them to use their unique abilities meaningfully and to guide others along the same path. This focus on the needs and development of others, according to Balti and Karoui Zouaoui (2024), fosters greater trust and heightens authentic influence.

Showing vulnerability was a strength and not a weakness, it showed I was authentic and human and there for them and not against (them) (2:1:1-2).

To be authentic, to be real, it is ok to show vulnerability, to understand the different cultures by asking questions and being inquisitive, to know each person and their family (2:17:24).

We are hardwired through connection through authenticity, connecting, a foundation for creating inclusion (7:18:29-30).

The ability to connect and build rapport and being authentic, to share weakness and strengths, (and) self-awareness (10:3:5-6).

If you can connect at any level, be authentic, that you are vulnerable – don't be scared to show that – show you are human and make mistakes. When I show vulnerability people do more for me and are more committed – I am human just like you (11:8:9).

(Y)ou do have worth and value not by the ideas of the world - that is the catalyst for authenticity and helping others embrace who they are because that is where their strength is (18:6:9).

Trust people with your vulnerabilities. Invite people to be open – but you need to be authentic (23:24:29).

Authenticity was noted by many participants as foundational to the cultivation of an inclusive leadership style as illustrated below:

I am authentic, I am truly authentic to who I am – people know what I stand for. The authentic self is humble and empathetic. Empathetic with loads of maturity and Emotional Intelligence as well, so being authentic is probably the grounding (for inclusive leadership) and the biggest foundation for me as well (6:18:25-26).

Participants saw authenticity as being humble, empathetic and grounded in EI.

4.6.2.3. Respectful

Humility was a value echoed throughout various interviews, alongside respect and kindness. These values contribute to creating supportive spaces where employees not only feel valued but are also inspired to emulate these behaviours.

To treat people fairly and equally whether you are the cleaner or MD. To be a leader you can (be) kind, good leaders are kind... A common thread that runs through is of respect – how you treat people and react to situations. Respect is the underlying belief and value system (1:17:23-24).

We can all write policy but it's about a feeling of inclusion and feeling valued, to belong and it comes with EI skills and respect and tolerance and passion (1:21:29-30).

...I always believed in respecting each person and different cultures (2:2:3-4).

One value I have is respect... the value of commitment with people's time and energy. I value people's time and energy a lot... (3:12:20-21).

...I always see the human and engage with respect and compassion (7:13:19-20).

Several participants referenced their faith or upbringing as having played a role in their value of respect.

My mom really empowered us, and my dad, about respecting people, not bullying or mocking people (4:11:18).

We have always grown up to see and respect every human regardless of position or title... (7:15:23-24).

(The c)ore of my upbringing was respect, spirituality and serving others... (14:6:8-9).

The value of respect was emphasised as being mutual.

Mutual respect for one other. Understanding what is important for the other person... and respecting their boundaries (18:13:18-19).

Treat people with respect, the way you want to be treated, and empathy is critical – walk in the shoes of others and lead by example (23:27:32).

Some participants mentioned empathy as an enabler of respect. Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) confirm the causal relationship between empathy and respect. In the presence of empathy and respect, there is a greater tolerance for diversity. These inclusive leaders, in turn, create psychologically safe cultures characterised by mutual trust and respect, where the views of all are recognised without fear, and efforts are rewarded fairly (Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020a). In the presence of fair reward and appreciation, employees are motivated to exert effort to achieve a goal (Saputra, 2021).

(T)he world would be a better place if we exude respect and that breeds tolerance for diversity (1:17:23-24).

Respect each other, value each other and respect differences to get creativity and innovation output (4:1:1-2).

We had people from diverse backgrounds – I was young when I started managing and different cultures and genders and ages – and I respected all their strengths and what they can bring (8:7:6-7).

The innovation output of teams improves when rich, high quality, diverse information is exchanged, and team members demonstrate mutual respect, care, and support (Jamshed & Majeed, 2019). In such a culture, diverse skills are

harnessed for innovation, creating a richer environment for creativity, where employees contribute their unique abilities, respect the skills of others, appreciate cultural differences, and view diversity positively (Shore *et al.*, 2018; Vladić *et al.*, 2021; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Randel, 2023). This creates a culture that can withstand societal and economic shocks (Vladić *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, respect entails providing feedback in a timely and constructive manner rather than a punitive one, thereby more effectively supporting growth (Vukadinović, 2022).

Younas *et al.* (2020a) confirm that creativity flourishes in supportive environments created by leaders who are attentive, thoughtful, fair, good listeners, open, honest, respectful, genuine, responsive, and communicative. Additionally, Younas *et al.* (2020a) highlight that leaders who promote dialogue, protect the rights of subordinates, engender trust, show care and compassion, and encourage and empower employees further enhance creativity.

Listening, communication, dialogue, and feedback were all practices repeatedly mentioned by participants as components of their inclusive leadership style.

Respect but have difficult conversations – respect and constructive dialogue – how you come across (14:9:13).

Respect allows you to listen to other people. If you are able to respect everyone you cannot harm them (16:18:26-27).

If you respect you can listen and if you are honest, you communicate clearly, you can say you don't understand but respect them (16:20:30).

If there is no respect, there is no trust. Building trust is essential as an Inclusive Leader (18:14:20).

Participant one noted that their respect stemmed from not feeling ashamed or embarrassed about where they came from. Just as self-acceptance or self-inclusion precedes authenticity, they also precede the respect offered to others.

4.6.2.4. Kind

A recurring theme was the importance of genuine, heart-centred human connection with colleagues, by showing empathy for their individual needs and challenges and consistently acting with kindness.

I am passionate about human connection because life wasn't easy – even getting my degree was like winning the lotto (1:8:10).

(G)ood leaders are kind... (1:17:23-24).

...I believe you can lead with kindness and get things done (4:19:30-31).

Participants believed in little acts of consistent kindness, and in finding ways to make people feel good, enriched and empowered. Kindness supports the cultivation of trust between a leader and their followers, trust is a critical aspect of the psychological safety required for a follower to take risks, create, and innovate. Men *et al.* (2020) posit that trust builds over time and is underpinned by four aspects: acting with integrity, demonstrating dependability, showing competence, and expressing kindness. According to Younas *et al.* (2020a), acts such as listening attentively, encouraging open communication, and nurturing quality long-term relationships, contribute to the cultivation of trust. Moreover, when leaders demonstrate empathy and kindness alongside a genuine commitment to helping employees achieve their goals, they are perceived as exhibiting behavioural integrity.

...lead with kindness, humility and empathy and ensure everyone is heard and seen and that the individuals feel heard and seen (4:21:33-35).

See people how they are, I try to be kind... it costs you nothing to be kind and try and be better every day... (15:12:15).

Ruben and Gigliotti (2021) confirm a shift toward servant, authentic, and ethical leadership styles that emphasise genuine, compassionate, empathetic, just, and value-driven behaviours. In today's changing world, leaders must act as change agents, a concept further described by Malambe and Toendepi (2023). They characterise change-agent leaders as strategic, collaborative, capable, inspiring, confident, innovative, compassionate, open, available, and accessible, with a clear vision that shows how everyone contributes to and benefits from change. Such leaders humanise the change journey by offering compassion and support. Participants demonstrated this by instilling belief in employees' abilities and

recognising the value of their differences, thereby igniting employees' change self-efficacy, which was reinforced by celebrating successes.

My ideal world is a world that takes everyone's difference into account whether seen or unseen, a world of genuine kindness, people are authentic, they care and they want to be the change and are the change... (4:17:28).

The more we get to know and understand each other and each other's path and then the more we can have a more inclusive society. In all our difference there is beauty – commonality should be empathy and understanding of each other – I am as human as you are (5:6:7).

A few participants mentioned the role of their faith in relation to kindness.

We need to find the kindness in each other and the more you treat people with kindness the more they will learn – to give them opportunities to be kind (4:22:36).

The fruits of the spirit and people must see and find in you – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control (15:22:31).

Also our religion teaches tolerance, kindness and patience... (19:15:20).

Participant four believes that every person possesses kindness within them and that the invitation is to turn inward and self-reflect.

I believe when someone self reflects – when did they become so hard and brutal – we are all the way we are because something happened to us – incremental steps that shape and define us (4:22:36).

Turning inward cultivates the self-awareness (a component of EI and a frequently mentioned theme across the transcripts) necessary to recognise when they may have become hardened.

4.6.2.5. Integrous

Being integrous, consistently demonstrating integrity through aligned words, actions, and behaviours, is a critical quality for any leader, especially a CEO. This alignment is essential not only for decision-making but also for being truly heard. An often overlooked aspect of being heard is the trust others have in what is being said. The participants built trust in their environments through integrity,

consistently aligning their words, actions, and behaviours. Similarly, Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) and Saputra (2021) describe trust as the coherence between spoken words and unspoken cues, such as the values that underpin actions and behaviours. As observed by Men *et al.* (2020), integrity is a key aspect in cultivating trust, which develops over time through reciprocal risk-taking.

Integrity – I walk the talk, if I say something I follow through on what I said, I am very black and white (6:18:25-26).

If people trust you they can share... if you don't know you can't be empathetic and that you can be trusted (22:13:16-17).

Leaders that operate with integrity are considered ethical leaders. Ethical leadership is characterised by fairness, transparency, and moral integrity, contributing to psychological safety and trust. Participant two believes in transparency, honesty, openness, authenticity, showing appreciation and having high levels of integrity, showing you can be trusted. This sentiment was echoed by two participants below.

(I have a)lways operated with integrity... (18:7:10).

(H)onesty and integrity and the ability to be objective and give critical feedback I think it's very important as a leader (1:22:31-32).

Inclusive leaders are grounded in integrity, as noted by Younas *et al.* (2020b) and Yikilmaz (2023). They are humble and empathetic and champion justice, fairness, equity and collaboration, building trust through these characteristics. Wood (2020), Vladić *et al.* (2021), Lei *et al.* (2023) and Yikilmaz (2023), state that these qualities, among others, have a significant impact on creativity, idea generation and the development and launch of new and disruptive products or services. This is largely due to the psychological capital created by inclusive leaders and exchanged reciprocally with employees.

As noted by Hogan and Coote (2014) and Younas *et al.* (2020b), this behavioural integrity of inclusive leaders, in turn, creates a culture well-suited for innovation. Supporting innovation and change necessitates extra-role behaviours, which emerge in environments like this, as noted by Younas *et al.* (2020b) and Yikilmaz

(2023). Younas *et al.* (2020b) explain, using causal attribution theory, that behavioural integrity - where inclusive leaders' actions align with their values and remain open without defensiveness - builds trust, reduces uncertainty, and promotes change-oriented behaviour. Fairness, employee consideration, open communication, and strong relationships further support positive employee responses to change.

The inclusive leaders interviewed often displayed courage in uploading the value of integrity through their intentional advocacy for inclusion, their willingness to challenge norms, and their efforts to create environments characterised by belonging.

Have courage to challenge what doesn't align with your values, be a role model and leader who is values based (14:20-32-33).

Courage and compassion are what I rely on most (21:23:32-33).

(Have the courage to be who you are,) ...people talk about authenticity, but that starts with integrity... (23:23:27-28).

(D)on't just act - be who you are – be empathetic and ethical, it talks to integrity - they should know who and not what you are and standing up for your teams at all times (21:27:37-38).

Integrity - be ethical, honest (22:33:53-55)

The behavioural integrity mentioned by the participants was demonstrated through various actions, including showing respect by active listening, being accessible for guidance, remaining open to new ideas, expressing appreciation, engaging in active and prompt dialogue, and taking responsibility for failures. This echoes the findings of Javed *et al.* (2019) and Younas *et al.* (2020b).

... really having the skill of active listening, very tuned, cultural EQ, what is going on, quick to capture that environment and get team cohesion, to be very clear in the beginning to set a clear vision, mission... (3:1:1-2).

Cultural awareness, bias awareness, communication skills, building trust, active listening, empowering others, helping people to grow, empathy, curiosity about others (4:9:15-16).

...to listen to understand then respond (8:9:10-11).

My belief is that every person has an incredible sense of self-worth and value and that is not to be diminished in a disrespectful way or that violates their psychological or bodily integrity... (18:16:22-23).

Several participants again referenced their upbringing and or religion, for installing in them the value of integrity.

One participant spoke of the role of their mother in role modelling and installing integrity in them. Another participant spoke of their Christian values in ensuring that they are committed and operate with integrity. Participant eight has an acronym for their values, EPIC.

EPIC – Excellence, passion, integrity, commitment – installed in me from little my parents said whatever you do, do it properly and if you are not passionate don't do it, integrity is so important after everything I have been through... (8:14:20-21).

Integrity is a deeply held value among the participants and is largely instilled through cultural systems that promote integrous behaviour.

4.6.3. Empathetic practices

The Inclusive Empathy Model illustrates eight empathetic practises: fairness, collaboration, active listening, symmetrical communication, self-reflection and awareness of others, open dialogue and feedback, continuous learning and vulnerability. Each of these eight elements will be discussed in the following section.

4.6.3.1. Fairness

Fairness emerged as a guiding principle for the participants, demonstrated through deliberate practices that promoted equity, diversity, and belonging, and, in turn, ensuring all voices were not only heard, but equally valued.

We allowed every manager to talk about their past and their perceptions and broke down unconscious biases – we allowed people to talk about their experiences and culture and struggles and be frank (19:6:8).

Fairness and seeing injustice and the effect on people especially when not addressed fairly... (t)hat fuelled my passion to focus on

transforming organisational culture and elevating employee well-being (18:3:4-5).

I was very aware of the unfairness between people around me and it made me more wanting to break that down and break down the biases (4:15:24-25).

Inclusive leaders are compassionate and transparent in their pursuit of justice, fair rewards, punishment, decision making, and equity, as confirmed by Yikilmaz (2023). Shaari *et al.* (2015) and Younas *et al.* (2020a) argue that the ethical standards of inclusive leaders help to reduce employees' perceptions of risk by enhancing their credibility and demonstrating fairness. This, in turn, cultivates trust and creates a greater sense of security among employees. As noted by Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) and Younas *et al.* (2020b) this, in turn, positively influences employee's behaviour towards change and creates a conducive climate for innovation and creativity (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Participant 18 echoed these sentiments and noted key values for inclusive leadership as:

Safety, recognition and reward – being appreciated, integrity, respect, fairness, justice (18:21:29-30).

Participant 18 emphasised the principle of fairness as a critical workplace practise. Men *et al.* (2020) define fairness and justice as integrity. Of the five aspects that Goleman considers components of EI (self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, motivation and empathy), he posits that empathy includes clear communication, conflict management, authentic responses, inspiration, and challenging unfairness (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017; Anand *et al.*, 2023).

Participant 14 highlighted emotional and cultural intelligence as key factors supporting fairness, respect, and collaboration.

(F)airness and respect and about being collaborative, being emotionally and culturally intelligent which is important to foster inclusion and the ability to empower others and enable them to be seen and noticed (14:12:19-20).

Fairness enables another to feel seen and heard and to know that they have an equal right to belong.

4.6.3.2. Collaboration

The participants focused on service, collaboration and community, both inside of the organisations and outside of the organisations. Several leaders additionally utilise their platforms to promote inclusion outside of the workplace through community upliftment projects.

I am a servant leader – I am here to serve the people, my team, my company, my community (7:9:12-13).

My community, Africa, my continent. Solving for my continent (17:15:23-24).

...Ubuntu – how it affected everyone and the community. We are only as good as the community (22:1:1-2).

Through empathy, the participants were better able to resolve conflicts by considering different views and facilitating resolution. According to Marathe *et al.* (2017), Javed *et al.* (2019), Younas *et al.* (2020b) and Lei *et al.* (2023), empathy makes leaders more approachable and relatable, strengthens human connection, builds relationships, and improves team collaboration and trust.

To show am willing to meet you halfway. To be vulnerable. I tried to win people over and collaborated a lot with people outside of the meeting (22:17:21-22).

Cultural intelligence – in different countries I need to understand the cultures. I have learnt so much about different cultures and what to say and not and collaboration is key... (8:8:8-9).

The emphasis on collaboration extended beyond the participants themselves; they also encouraged their teams to collaborate.

(C)ollaboration between teams and valuing every stakeholder (16:1:1-2).

Collaboration and effective teamwork (22:23:34-36).

The participants had and continue to have an ability to build genuine relationships, which Marathe *et al.* (2017), Praveenadevi and Girimurugan (2019), Mehmood *et*

al. (2021) and Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) all identify as a primary characteristic of inclusive leadership, achieved through empathy and by creating a space where everyone feels heard.

Also to not underestimate anyone's contribution and collaboration is key. Everyone wants to be heard (2:15:21-22).

Malik (2023) identifies collaboration as one of six behaviour traits defining inclusive leadership. Innovation is enhanced through collaborative learning (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024), and by cultivating knowledge-sharing networks that enable innovation (Lei *et al.*, 2023). An environment conducive to innovation encourages diverse networks that exchange rich ideas and collaborate to achieve a shared vision (Wood, 2020; Yikilmaz, 2023). Yarbrough (2023) emphasises the importance of developing relational skills to enhance a leader's ability to collaborate effectively and motivate their teams. These relational skills also help leaders cultivate conflict resolution abilities within their teams, enhancing collaboration, performance, and effectiveness (Wong *et al.*, 2019; Yarbrough, 2023). Participants additionally referenced relational skills - an outcome of EI.

Interpersonal skills – drives so many things – it drives you to bring collaboration, open yourself to learning and positive criticism – it helps you to grow – helps you to mobilise people to get things done. It all comes down to interpersonal skills (21:15:20).

(F)orgive and try to understand why. It aids collaboration and introspection (22:25:40-41).

Eddy *et al.* (2022) and Yarbrough (2023) stress the need to shift from outdated hierarchical approaches to other-centric, participatory, and inclusive approaches, that require EI. These approaches create inclusive organisational brand cultures that are not only more innovative (Randel, 2023), but also unlock greater individual and collective potential through collaboration. In innovation, 'collaboration is crucial' (Vladić *et al.*, 2021:136). The significance of collaboration was echoed by Participant two:

(M)y first lesson in leadership was entitlement is your enemy – I thought I had arrived and quickly learnt that collaboration is the most important accomplishment as it builds trust and not everyone is

accepting of change and realising I couldn't do it on my own, I needed every one of them to be part of the team (2:1:1-2).

According to Odor (2018), collaboration strengthens a culture based on shared beliefs and values, unlike weak cultures led by autocratic leaders. Collaborative cultures not only drive innovation but also enhance organisational adaptability and sustain competitive advantage (Hogan & Coote, 2014).

4.6.3.3. Active listening

Participants linked listening skills to aiding the collaboration essential for innovation, a connection confirmed by Balti and Karoui Zouaoui (2024). When employees feel heard and valued, they are inspired to innovate, leading to collaboration and knowledge sharing (Lei *et al.*, 2023). This sentiment was echoed by Participant two. Similarly, Participant five identifies as a listener, highlighting the value they place on attentive engagement within teams:

To listen to each and every suggestion in the collaboration. To make them feel valued (2:12:16-17).

I am also a listener (5:9:10-11).

Environments that value listening enable employees to fully participate, feel valued, and have their ideas heard, which fosters creativity and trust. This, in turn, unlocks their potential and generates additional human energy and value in the workplace. The inclusive leaders interviewed actively listen, increasing employee engagement, which, as noted by Javed *et al.* (2019) and Younas *et al.* (2020a), enhances commitment to innovation by encouraging creative work behaviours.

Yikilmaz (2023) notes that empathy enables a leader to create environments where everyone feels seen, heard, understood, and valued. This is reinforced by Participants 22 and 23:

The more you listen the more you hear, see and feel (22:13:17).

Active listening... means trying to understand what the other says as opposed to listening to respond. If you stick with it long enough you will find wisdom. Practise active listening, suspend judgement and put yourself in their shoes (23:7:8-9).

As noted by Javed *et al.* (2019), Younas *et al.* (2020b), Lei *et al.*, (2023), active listening is one of several inclusive leadership attributes that coexist with respect, accessibility, openness to new ideas, appreciation of contributions, dialogue, timely constructive feedback, and accountability. Together, these create a culture of inclusion where diverse views are heard and valued (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016; Odor, 2018). These sentiments were confirmed by Participants 14 and 19.

It comes down to who I am, one of my strongest attributes is that I listen, I intentionally build inclusive teams – hiring diverse talents and fostering inclusive teams and empathy (14:4:5-6).

(L)istening is a skill that has to be mastered in leadership, (alongside) very strong communication skills and empathy (19:12:16-17).

Lasrado and Kassem (2021) highlight empathy, an aspect of EI, as the ability to step outside of oneself and actively listen. Participants demonstrated the ability to actively listen, see the world from another's perspective, and understand their thoughts and emotions. Malambe and Toendepi (2023) confirm the causal relationship between empathy, active listening, and perspective taking, which inspires both the listener and the one being heard.

(I)t helped me to put myself in their shoes to deeply listen and understand and seeing privilege (10:2:3-4).

Listen and listen without judgement and do not expect a specific answer (12:7:9-10). ...I look and listen, and you can see a lot (12:11:14-15). Listening – I had to learn to listen (12:13:18-19).

(L)isten to understand not listening to answer (4:19:30-31).

Be true to yourself and listen, be aware, awareness of your staffs' needs and dreams... (2:18:25-26).

(H)ear while you are listening (2:10:12-13)

Participant three echoed the findings of Lei *et al.* (2023), stating that when employees feel heard, understood and valued, they are more inspired to innovate, which enhances sustainable competitiveness.

(I)f you want your team to innovate or do more with less... listening and understanding and empathy. (L)et me see the same problem with those eyes (3:3:5-6).

Active listening is a skill that aids the trust required between a leader and a follower, and is a prerequisite for a leader to be fully heard. This is supported by Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) and Saputra (2021) and it is one of the most frequently referenced empathetic practices highlighted by the participants, as the following quotes illustrate.

And I ask over and over until they share – understanding beyond the work what is going on – I don't have to solve - just listen (21:4:6).

When you want people to give their opinion don't give your idea first, you will become more inclusive when you listen more than you speak and (when) your views on a situation are last (19:24:34-35).

Being an active, sincere listener to people's ideas, thoughts, suggestions, complaints, suggestions, opinions, etc (22:18:23-24).

It's about listening and listening with intent. How we listen and behave, facial and verbal, everything, I try (to) be conscious of that (1:9:11-12).

(T)he skill of active listening, very tuned, cultural EI, what is going on, quick to capture that environment and get team cohesion (3:1:1-2).

(W)hen I was young I would want to talk as I want you to hear my side. I would listen with intent to defence and now I step away from defence – to listen to understand then respond. With cultural diversity that is key – active listening (8:9:10-11).

Cultural awareness, bias awareness, communication skills, building trust, active listening, empowering others, helping people to grow, empathy, (and) curiosity about others (are all skills that support inclusive leadership) (4:9:15-16).

I show I am a great listener (6:12:15-16).

(T)o be an active listener... (23:12:16-17).

I listen and take notes and then ask the quiet people their voice (11:1:1-2).

One just has to actively listen to the spoken and non-spoken feedback one receives along the journey. You don't always have to act on it, but you do always have to listen (22:4:6).

(A)lways listen... (18:11:15-16).

It comes down to who I am, one of my strongest attributes is that I listen, I intentionally build inclusive teams... I have a heart for people – balance the business and people agenda, having that level of empathy and compassion (14:4:5-6).

Without listening I would never be able to understand what they want (16:6:8-9). (R)espect allows you to listen to other people (16:18:26-27). If you want to be a leader, you must be a good listener and honest with your views and not pay lip service (16:24:34-35).

Some participants attributed their cultivation of active listening to their upbringing.

My grandmother was very influential in my life... she was a good storyteller and listener (22:12:16).

Most of the participants interviewed said they developed active listening as a skill with intention.

4.6.3.4. Symmetrical communication

Praveenadevi and Girimurugan (2019) noted active listening as a key aspect of communication, which plays a vital role in achieving symmetrical communication - a balanced, two-way exchange where all parties feel heard and understood. The causal link between active listening and communication was echoed by several participants.

A bad communicator doesn't listen and just tells you their opinions and speaks (16:15:21-22).

Communication, I am good with communication and listening (5:10:12-13).

(A)ctively listen and not express my opinion sometime which is hard as I like to put forward what I was thinking (15:18:23-24).

Ruben and Gigliotti (2021:952) defined leadership as, 'a phenomenon that is co-constructed through communication connections established between leaders and followers'. Rabiul *et al.* (2023) state that leadership cannot be separated from communication and is enacted through it. Men *et al.* (2020) describe communication as the 'central, defining, and constitutive feature of leadership' (Men *et al.*, 2020:3). Two participants confirmed these sentiments.

Leadership is about communication (9:10:14-15). When you connect with the human they want to support you until it works (9:12:17-18).

Effective communication skills (are key) (22:21:29-30).

Leadership can be considered a process of social influence mediated through communication. Ruben and Gigliotti (2021) describe communication as a co-constructed reciprocal process between the message originator and receiver, forming a mutually causal system. Leadership potential is realised through recipient resonance, activation, or triggering, creating a network of recipients who become a 'self-generating, self-organising and self-sustaining system (with) multiple feedback loops' (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021:950). According to Lasrado and Kassem (2021) culture emerges from this system. Participants viewed communication not merely as an exchange of information but as a strategic tool that breaks down barriers.

Constant communication breaks down barriers. People need to sit down communicate and listen to each other (16:11:16).

According to Participant six, leadership involves sharing a vision, communicating that vision, building people's strengths, breaking down silos, leveraging relationships, and motivating others towards the vision. Several participants emphasised symmetrical communication as vital for inclusive leadership through message resonance. Kalogiannidis (2020) defines communication as the process of transmitting a message to multiple stakeholders across various platforms through verbal and non-verbal cues. Emotional resonance is achieved only when that communication is consciously adapted to the audience. Rabiul *et al.* (2023) confirm that communication needs to be well articulated, structured, and received in a way that creates emotional resonance and movement.

I can adapt to different communication styles – you have to know your staff – some are sensitive, some you must be direct, some people want facts, some people don't want to be asked about their family, they want to do the job (2:7:9-10).

(C)ommunicate in the language of those in the room (22:17:21-22).

I have learnt so much about different cultures and what to say and not to say... (8:8:9-9).

Cultural intelligence (supports inclusive leadership) because you need to be aware of what to change (8:9:10-11).

Cultural awareness, bias awareness, (and) communication skills... (support inclusive leadership) (4:9:15-16).

As defined by Rabiul *et al.* (2023), symmetrical communication competency can be described as the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication, evaluated by the achievement of its goals and the avoidance of negative consequences. Siano *et al.* (2017) modernised Bernstein's communication wheel (a checklist that considers distinct stakeholder types and communication channels) emphasising a more intentional and conscious use of communication, a view confirmed by the participants.

Participant three developed symmetrical communication skills through diverse roles across different cities and countries, gaining the ability to see situations from others' perspectives. Several participants similarly referred to the importance of understanding the people you are communicating to.

(Y)ou have to adapt very quickly to other cultures and environments (3:2:3-4).

There is culture, beliefs and assumptions between different communications and nations – barriers, and communication can resolve that (16:11:16).

People think Africa is wild until you communicate. You don't realise people have feelings until you communicate (16:12:17).

A good communicator allays fears – takes away the mist – when you communicate you see what they are concerned about and address it. Listen to the people, do research about the people you want to talk to and address their problems (16:14:20).

Lee and Kim (2022) describe symmetrical communication as adaptive communication, a dialogue between employees and the organisation where employees feel seen, heard, competent, appreciated, and included, shaped by executives' verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Kalogiannidis (2020) supports Lee and Kim's (2022) findings, noting that relationship-focused executives gain greater commitment through symmetrical communication and positively influence

employee's behaviour toward change (Younas *et al.*, 2020b; Toendepi, 2023). This sentiment was confirmed by Participant nine.

It's (about) communicating the vision to people and understand(ing) where they come from and treating them like a human (9:12:17-18).

Effective communication builds trust, drives change, influences employee performance, and is essential for leadership (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015; Kalogiannidis, 2020; Men *et al.*, 2020; Biggs *et al.*, 2024).

Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) and Malambe and Toendepi (2023) identify EI as a key enabler of effective communication.

Vladić *et al.* (2021) highlight authenticity, an outcome of EI, as crucial for workplace engagement and innovation. The inclusive leaders interviewed strongly value authentic communication.

It's about being transparent and communicating anything that will impact those who are within my circle of influence, whether they are reporting to me or not (6:19:27-28).

If you respect you can listen and if you are honest, you communicate clearly, you can say you don't understand but (that you) respect them. You must be honest in communicating (16:20:30).

I think it's just the natural ability to be myself that enables me to communicate and take a person for who they are (19:15:20).

Saputra (2021) emphasises a leadership approach that encourages shared decision making, discussion, critical thinking, multiple perspectives, and teamwork. Rabiul *et al.* (2023) recommend training all leaders especially CEOs, in communication skills (Lee and Kim, 2022).

Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) identify communication as an under researched area involving the purpose, clarity, logic, credibility, resonance, and emotional engagement in communication (Saputra, 2021). This approach creates an environment conducive to innovation, where diverse networks generate and collaborate on ideas toward a shared vision (Wood, 2020).

4.6.3.5. Self-reflection and awareness of others

Saputra (2021) notes a causal link between a leader's self-confidence and effective communication. Participants considered self-confidence to be an outcome of self-reflection, an aspect of EI and an enabler of the awareness of others.

(I) f you are not self-aware you cannot see the impact you have on others and the environment, and you can't see the targets you haven't met (5:11:14-15).

Self and other awareness (most enabled my journey to inclusive leadership) - the more you ask questions yourself the more you ask others and calibrating on how you are showing up for others (10:15:25).

According to Ferdman and Deane (2014), self-awareness helps leaders make more authentic decisions and that it reduces psychological distress. Participants expressed similar sentiments, reporting that they became accustomed to pausing, suspending self-judgement, and making clearer decisions, which reduced their stress.

Listen, not doubting yourself, taking the time to go inwards, do not hurry to speak or fill (the) silence, or agree with a view you don't understand, to appear smart and be well rounded... (22:37:60-61).

Authenticity was a big part of my journey – finding the real me – if we are ok understanding ourselves, we will understand others better. Take care of self to take care of others (12:23:33).

Being critically self-aware and making a habit of this helped me to understand myself better before I could try to understand the next person. So, getting to know me on the journey was the first step (22:16:20).

Your authenticity will be a beacon of light so that others can shine their light (18:28:38-39).

Be true to yourself and listen, be aware, awareness of your staff's needs and dreams (2:18:25-26).

When asked what had supported their inclusive leadership journey, Participant 10 noted that it was:

The ability to connect and build rapport and being authentic, to share weakness and strengths, (and) self-awareness (10:3:5-6).

Authentic leaders, as noted by Vladić *et al.* (2021), are receptive to feedback, optimise collaboration, learning, and development by including diverse perspectives. Baccarani and Bonfanti (2015) and Balti and Karoui Zouaoui (2024) identify EI as essential for authentically engaging with others in a heartfelt and harmonious manner, which supports collaboration and innovation. More specifically, self-awareness enables individuals to recognise their impact on others, a point echoed by Participant six and four:

(T)he ability to listen, manage your emotions, (and) how to manage other people's emotions... (supports inclusive leadership) (6:22:31-32).

Self and social awareness and understanding blind spots (supports inclusive leadership) (4:19:30-31).

As noted by Lu *et al.* (2022), self-awareness enables individuals to guide their thoughts and behaviours, and to manage emotions and moods. Koutsoumpa (2023) and Balti and Karoui Zouaoui (2024) add that self-awareness enhances self-efficacy by fostering adaptability and competence in managing change. Lu *et al.* (2022) further assert that EI is the most crucial psychological concept for achieving a successful, healthy, happy, and adaptable life. The participants in this study demonstrated exceptionally high levels of EI as evidenced by the skills they identified as important for inclusive leadership. These skills are interrelated: listening enhances communication, self-awareness supports empathy, and empathy enhances listening. Participants emphasised that listening is not merely about hearing words, but about truly understanding what others are saying and not saying.

(L)isten carefully to what is being said and if people are not saying anything what does that say (22:11:14-15).

You have to be mindful and present at all times. You have to listen to tone and hand movement (22:17:21-22).

Emotional Intelligence... (c)omes from stilling yourself... (22:20:27-28).

As soon as you are too busy and overwhelmed – you stop listening and become less agile and inclusive. Having Emotional Intelligence to hold back and understand the problem. (10:7:11-12).

Empathy, self-awareness, listening skills, communication skills, (and) awareness (support my inclusive leadership style) (4:15:24-25).

By modelling these interrelated inclusive behaviours supported by high EI, the participants were able to create inclusive spaces as articulated by Participant four and two.

(It is about) fairness and respect and about being collaborative, being emotionally and culturally intelligent which is important to foster inclusion and the ability to empower others and enable them to be seen and noticed (4:12:19-20).

...I had to be self-aware in terms of bias and extreme awareness of everyone having to be treated equally as that is what life should be (2:2:3-4).

I was very aware of the unfairness between people around me... Bias is because people don't get to know the other person (4:15:24-25).

Behaviours mentioned by most participants included empathy, compassion, EI, self-awareness, and confidence, as noted by two participants below:

Being self-aware of how I show up, challenging my own biases (14:4:5-6).

It all starts with me – my level of self-awareness – how I show up – being proud of who I am and how I show up and how do I pay it forward and being aware of the people that rely on me (14:12:18-19).

(F)ocus on what makes you, you, and the growth will come... Reflecting on my authenticity and imposter syndrome with my unique purpose and growth (supported my inclusive leadership journey) (7:10:14-15).

Participant 10 also noted that self-compassion is foundational to compassion for others.

Compassion for self enables compassion to others, as you get older (10:5:8-9).

Several participants mentioned that self-reflection improved with age; some referenced their upbringing, while others cited feedback from coaching, mentoring, and training.

Initially I would take things personally and react without consideration... I would reflect on my style and how I could improve (1:12:16).

Always reflect on everything you do. Go back and look at decisions, don't judge, reflect and learn (8:18:26-27).

Maybe it was that undergraduate... meeting different minds, my childhood growing up in my community, my gran with (her) wisdom and self-awareness and (my) first most difficult job (22:35:58).

Go back – we don't really sit and reflect on who we really are... I have seen how important it is to reflect on how we are raised (9:22:33-34).

Participant four (below) observed that everyone possesses innate kindness, but self-reflection is necessary to overcome barriers that may block it. This aligns with Wood's (2020) view that leaders must engage in self-healing to cultivate environments where stakeholder-centric innovation can thrive. This principle is also reflected in Laloux's (2014) concept of teal organisations, which are designed for complexity and grounded in leaders' inner transformation. Similarly, David and Congleton (2022) emphasise achieving emotional agility for effective organisational brand leadership through becoming aware of personal patterns, accepting them, labelling thoughts and emotions to gain perspective, and acting in accordance with one's values.

Wood (2020) describes a four-stage transformation beginning with EI through mindfulness and self-awareness. The second involves consciously addressing unconscious obstacles. The third stage focuses on personal growth and full accountability. Finally, the fourth stage is about showing up authentically and using one's unique abilities meaningfully. This transformation marks a shift from a materialistic worldview to one centred on self-awareness and collective self-mastery.

(E)very person has kindness but something along the way blocked that kindness and I believe when someone self reflects – when did they become so hard and brutal – we are all the way we are because someone happened to us – incremental steps that shape and define us (4:22:36).

The participants do not describe self-reflection as a critical exercise but rather as a source of learning and growth.

I try to reflect on my behaviour... I reflected on how I could be better... Acknowledge blind spots... (15:13:16-17).

...they shared blind spots. Initially I thought no... and then reflected and maybe there is room to improve and help them experience me better and be a better person (15:14:18).

Feedback is received with a sense of ownership rather than self-criticism, reflecting the confidence and self-compassion that shape the reflection process.

I can sit back and think now instead of reacting so quickly. I take time to think. Reflecting a lot instead of reacting (1:11:14-15).

I ask my team what are three things I must; continue, start, stop, do better. I reflect and take it as it is and work on it. People's perception is their reality (19:13:18).

I ask them what I need to grow on, and I go back and reflect and some I need to grow on (21:16:21).

Participants who approached reflection from a place of self-acceptance were able to self-reflect without attachment, allowing them to learn and grow. Floricica and Tasente (2022) describe self-acceptance, along with acceptance of the environment and others, as a catalyst for change. The process begins with developing awareness of both the positive and negative aspects of the self, including skills, achievements, limitations, and failures - without judgement but with self-respect (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2015; Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017; Floricica & Tasente, 2022, Lu *et al.*, 2022).

Malambe and Toendepi (2023) argue that leaders are made through training, experience, education, and personal mastery, which involves awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, values, and aspirations (intrapersonal), as well as their impact on others (interpersonal). According to Schaap and Dippenaar (2017), this level of EI enables leaders to express themselves and inspire change through passion, enthusiasm, knowledge, and skills that earn followers' trust (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Balti and Karoui Zouaoui (2024) identify EI as a critical driver of organisational behaviour, noting that one effective way to enhance EI is through soliciting feedback, as confirmed by Participant 11 below.

Feedback is good, people give you self-awareness and can be brutally honest (11:8:9).

The literature confirms that engaging in self-reflection, actively seeking feedback, and continually adapting one's approach to meet the needs of the team, helps cultivate inclusive leadership (Wong *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.*, 2020a; Vukadinović, 2022; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023).

4.6.3.6. Open dialogue and feedback

According to several participants, the journey to inclusive leadership is paved with continual self-reflection, checking in with others, and seeking feedback.

Participants described feedback as a deliberate and reciprocal act, emphasising the importance of intentional giving and receiving. Feedback about how others perceive and experience you enhances self-awareness, enabling you to leverage your strengths, address areas for development, confront fear, and activate courage when needed.

I always ask them when I do quarterly reviews to give me feedback – what do you think I can do to become a better leader – do you have tips – I make it a casual conversation (2:4:5-6).

I was born a leader, but I have worked with leaders who have refined, given feedback and polished me (6:3:4).

Being deliberate about giving and receiving feedback. Mindfulness practise, spending time with myself and reflecting on my journey and taking on board feedback on how others receive and see me. Knowing that sense of self-awareness – playing to strengths, leaning into development areas, facing fear, being courageous when I needed to (14:5:7).

Introspection and knowing who and what I am and what I stood for. I did it with lots of feedback and discussion (19:23:33).

Several participants emphasised the importance of direct, objective and honest conversations, as well as creating the right conditions for them.

Frank honest conversation on feedback and ways to improve (20:8:13).

Being approachable as people feel comfortable to talk to me, to ask for guidance, to trust me, I have always been open and transparent and given feedback objectively (1:11:14-15).

As noted by Younas *et al.* (2020b) and Yikilmaz (2023), psychological safety is essential for open dialogue, allowing team members to speak freely without fear of judgement. In such environments, the team is prioritised over the individual, while individual contributions are still recognised and appreciated. Inclusive leadership is closely linked to psychological safety and innovative work behaviour (Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Inclusive leaders actively inquire about failures, their causes, and the lessons learned, demonstrating openness and accessibility that empower employees to share mistakes without fear. Participant two describes failure and success as experiences shared by a leader with their team.

Inclusivity means part of and equal to. Part of successes or failures, I never saw myself as greater than (2:2:3-4).

Creativity thrives within a supportive environment. Supportive environments are created by inclusive leaders who are attentive, fair, good listeners, open, honest, respectful, genuine, responsive, and communicative. Employee commitment to change is strengthened in an environment characterised by trust and dialogue (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). A change-ready culture views resistance to change as a signal for feedback and an opportunity for dialogue (Malambe & Toendepi, 2023).

Participants viewed feedback as a two-way dialogue, demonstrating a commitment not only to receiving but also to giving feedback for developmental purposes, as indicated below. This dialogue was emphasised as needing to be balanced and reciprocal, providing both parties with positive and negative feedback.

I therefore commit to developing them as much as I can and giving feedback (2:8:11).

You also need feedback from people on strengths and weaknesses – which is why it is so important to get feedback. (H)ow I thought I was coming across and how I was perceived was useful, that my empathy wasn't as high as I thought it was (10:1:1-2).

My purpose is lifting as I rise, give the feedback to people, give them the mirror, let them see themselves, hear themselves (16:2:15-16).

Human beings are by nature good until they prove you otherwise. You must treat them that way – that they can learn, take feedback and try new things and if that doesn't happen you change (6:16:21-22).

...I have had a challenge with a report not being collaborative – I gave him time and feedback – he is such a natural to lead and that's my task – to ready him for it (23:13:16-17).

Respect was highlighted by numerous participants as essential for creating the conditions that support dialogue.

Respect each other, value each other and respect differences to get creativity and innovation output. Trust each other (4:1:1-2).

It is not what you say but how. Respect but have difficult conversations - respect and constructive dialogue – how you come across (14:9:13).

We have always grown up to see and respect every human regardless of position or title and that's remained my north star... (7:15:23-24).

Respect people (8:10:12-13).

Respect, respecting individuality (10:12:20-21).

(E)mpathy (supports my inclusive leadership style), understanding and appreciating the contribution of each individual for who they are (18:22:31-32).

A lot of collaboration and asking for feedback – how did you feel after that (19:23:33)?

(Be) approachable, be there for them, be vulnerable, be a good listener and create a platform for open conversation (2:4:5-6).

Participants introduced the theme of courage, noting that it takes courage to both receive and give uncomfortable feedback as articulated by Participant 11 and 12 below.

(I)t's hard when people give you nasty feedback but take what they are trying to tell you (11:14:18-19).

I am ok putting it out there being wrong and finding people to help substantiate my thinking. It took courage and strong leaders to take the risk with me (12:5:16).

As observed by Muntean *et al.* (2020), the key is to establish one's own self-worth independently of others' views and opinions, while remaining open to feedback and capable of critically evaluating one's behaviour as adaptive or maladaptive.

Feedback can come from a single source or multiple sources; some participants (below) mentioned receiving feedback from their teams, while others referred to coaches, mentors, trainers, colleagues, and supervisors.

I am intentional about always seeking feedback especially on blind spots and things I don't see and working with my coach who has been critical to my journey... (7:10:14-15).

A whole team giving and receiving feedback – when we show up well and (when we) don't (10:1:1-2).

Early exposure to learning and development and feedback and calibrating self with others... (10:4:7).

Participants welcome feedback as a tool for awareness. Participant 11 regularly conducts 360-degree assessments on themselves. Participant 16 completed an assessment and realised their empathy score was low, prompting them to actively seek support and feedback from others to improve it. Participant 15 shared a similar experience:

You don't experience yourself – you rarely get honest feedback especially as a CEO – you have to take a step back – am I being inclusive (15:8:10)?

I was expecting positive feedback, I was shocked, they shared blind spots (15:14:18).

Open and honest dialogue also builds connection, which mobilises movement. Participant 22 emphasised that feedback is not only verbal.

One just has to actively listen to the spoken and non-spoken feedback one receives along the journey (22:4:6).

According to most participants, if a leader wants to be inclusive, they must be open to inviting others into dialogue.

4.6.3.7. Continuous learning

The participants interviewed did not feel that they had stopped learning on their journeys and were advocates of self-reflection and a perpetual growth mindset, which made them adaptable, open to new ideas and, therefore, more innovative. Inclusive leaders, as noted by Javed *et al.* (2019), Younas *et al.* (2020b) and Lei

et al. (2023), learn from failures. Innovation requires both a high quality and quantity of knowledge and is enhanced through a growth mindset (learning through experiences, experiments, and failures), as well as knowledge, understanding, agility, collaboration, and empowerment (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024). Several participants (below) emphasised an openness and willingness to learn.

Show me any leader who hasn't made mistakes or fallen down and how they rose from learning (6:15:19-20).

I am curious and I am continually learning... (7:10:14-15).

Growth, learning and a desire to grow (supported my inclusive leadership journey) (8:10:12-13).

Curiosity, openness to learning, not knowing it all, there is so much out there to understand and know (10:13:5-6).

Appreciate the skills of learning because they will help you reposition yourself and iterate your thinking (13:92:149).

I say I don't know things and am still learning... (8:13:18-19).

I have associated myself with learning and unlearning (20:4:7-8).

Continuous learning to equip yourself and keep driving what you want to achieve (21:14:18-19).

Committing myself to continuous learning (aided my inclusive leadership journey). Keeping up with changes, learning and re-learning, un-learning, and learning became a continuous process for me (22:21:29-30).

The participants not only had a passion for continual learning, but they sought to transfer that passion to their followers as indicated below by Participant two.

...I want to know my team has succeeded because they can continue to do their jobs and continue growing, by me installing a culture of learning (2:8:11).

Inclusive leaders cultivate psychologically safe environments where failures are seen as valuable lessons (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Alzyoud & Abuzaid, 2023). Their passion for continuous learning nurtures curiosity and openness, which, in turn, support team inclusion (Malik, 2023). This commitment to growth is essential for cultivating an inclusive culture, as emphasised by Hogan and Coote (2014), Odor

(2018), and Malambe and Toendepi (2023). Furthermore, Hekneby and Olsen (2024) highlight that cultures grounded in consistent growth and learning are better equipped to adapt to change. Such adaptive cultures prioritise customer knowledge, maintain a service-centric focus, and actively seek and respond to feedback (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021).

Participants' sources of learning varied and included self-reflection, reading, learning from others, and trial and error, as indicated by Participant 10, 17 and 20 below.

I was interested in experimenting, learning and adopting beliefs (10:9:15-16).

...I get a sense through reading and learning and lived experience and ongoing aspiration to acquire knowledge (17:11:16).

(T)here are a lot of learnings along the way which will help you to craft your leadership and always find a mentor to relate to and learn from and assist in your journey (20:18:28-29).

Participant 22 highlighted that learning involves curves, and it is important to recognise and appreciate these curves.

The learning curve was steep, and there I encountered various challenges, each of which I accepted as an opportunity to learn, grow and contribute to the organisation as best I could (22:3:5).

The participants' passion for learning was reflected even in the way they answered the questions, demonstrating radical accountability as indicated by Participants 15, 19 and 22 below.

When I focused on my team, I missed the other stakeholders and perhaps there is a learning there (15:7:9).

It's not thinking you are the best – you are constantly learning (19:13:18).

(K)ey learnings that emerged from personal experiences in the workplace and in society in general, which created in me a desire to be someone who is inclusive in my thoughts, words, and in my actions (22:30:47).

Participant 21 said it all comes down to a leader's interpersonal skills.

Interpersonal skills - drive so many things – it drives you to being collaborative. Open yourself to learning and positive criticism – it helps you to grow – helps you to mobilise people to get things done. It all comes down to interpersonal skills (21:15:20).

According to Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), inclusive leaders facilitate deep learning and are better able to identify the root causes of errors, expediting remediation and preventing recurrence. Yarbrough (2023) confirm that leaders are now being sought after for their elevated levels of empathy, EI, and trust building capabilities. These leaders empower teams, unlock potential, nurture continuous learning and growth, strive for excellence, and embrace opportunities, all of which are foundational to innovation.

4.6.3.8. Vulnerability

Participants indicated that an important aspect of learning is having the courage to be vulnerable and admit mistakes.

It is important we make mistakes and show we are vulnerable (1:18:25).

I inspire people. I am vulnerable and I share mistakes and failures, and I share what I learn, and I grow (23:8:10-11).

Comfort with vulnerability enables a leader to openly share their negative experiences, build trust, and pave the way for others to share more openly. One participant had to develop their humility and empathy before embracing vulnerability, while another participant demonstrated humility by being willing to make themselves vulnerable enough to meet someone halfway. Participant seven's vulnerability stemmed from the understanding that they could not achieve their goals without the support of others.

...I was vulnerable, I cannot do it without them (7:6:8).

Several participants viewed vulnerability as a strength, as indicated by the participant quotes below.

Showing vulnerability was a strength and not a weakness, it showed I was authentic and human and there for them and not against (them) (2:1:1-2).

When I show vulnerability people do more for me and are more committed. I am human just like you (11:8:9).

(W)hat you see is what you get (11:20:28-29).

Hogan and Coote (2014), Düger (2019) and Rehman *et al.* (2019), confirm the relationship between authenticity and vulnerability, noting that leaders who have the courage to be authentic are comfortable being open and vulnerable, as indicated by Participant two below.

To be authentic, to be real, it is ok to show vulnerability, to understand the different cultures by asking questions and being inquisitive, to know each person and their family (2:17:24).

Several participants stated that when a leader has the courage to be vulnerable, authenticity is felt, and connections are strengthened.

You need to be vulnerable – it creates connection between yourself and your team. Not faking it – be yourself (21:11:15).

Creating connections and leading with courageous vulnerability... (4:19:30-31).

Be vulnerable, be comfortable saying I don't know, I can't, can you teach me, show me ...come across as human so that you are relatable (6:22:31-32).

(P)eople don't find resonance unless you share your vulnerabilities, it's about trusting them with your failures – and success but more failure (23:23:27-28).

Trust people with your vulnerabilities. Invite people to be open – but you need to be authentic (23:24:29).

Participant two's advice to aspiring inclusive leaders is to:

(Be) approachable, be there for them, be vulnerable, be a good listener and create a platform for open conversation (2:4:5-6).

Participants reflected on their journeys and noted that understanding the value of vulnerability, and being able to show up vulnerably, came with time, as articulated by the below participants.

With leadership, with staff, you have to be strong and build and not show vulnerability and now I can show it and embrace it (8:13:18-19).

When I was younger, I was so certain – I was so white and black, but the world was grey – if you can see yourself in the grey nothing is right or wrong... (23:8:10-11).

Several participants indicated that they started their leadership journey with lower self-esteem, largely believing they could not be vulnerable, as illustrated by the following three participant quotes. As their self-esteem grew, they became increasingly able to show vulnerability.

...I come with baggage, with low self-esteem, and you have to be vulnerable and open up and speak to people. It allowed me to say you won't go far if you don't open yourself up (9:7:9).

Don't assume leaders have the answers. Be vulnerable - be comfortable saying I don't know, I can't, can you teach me, can you show me (6:22:31-32).

You need to be vulnerable as a leader – you don't know all the answers, and no one can trust if you don't connect with the organisation (17:6:8-9).

Participant nine emphasised that, in a fast-paced world, being open-minded is essential, and this requires leaders to show the vulnerability to admit that they don't have all the answers. According to Participant nine, the alternative is risking obsolescence.

Open mindedness is linked to vulnerability; any change has to start with being open and being available to it (9:8:10-11).

According to Participant 23, a leader should have faith in their people:

State the objective and people will find the way through – you don't need to prescribe to them. People will surprise you on the upside and treat them with dignity and respect. You have to lead with the trust – you have to make yourself vulnerable (23:20:24).

Leading with trust and faith in others requires vulnerability, as it involves relinquishing control and exposing oneself, both of which demand courage. It is this courage that allows inclusive, human-centred leadership to thrive.

4.6.4. Conclusion

Inclusive leadership, as described by Lasrado and Kassem (2021) and Alzyoud and Abuzaid (2023), embodies a relational approach characterised by openness,

accessibility, appreciation, effective communication, active listening, conscious empowerment, and encouragement of dialogue and feedback. The participants interviewed exemplified this description. Through their beliefs and actions, they enabled others to feel seen, heard, understood, and valued, fulfilling fundamental human needs for belonging and uniqueness (Yikilmaz, 2023).

Through belonging and uniqueness, these inclusive leaders cultivate psychological contracts, leading to increased innovative solutions and creative work behaviours, promoting optimal organisational adaptation to change, sustainable performance, and societal contribution (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Yikilmaz, 2023). Inclusive leadership is the style of organisational brand leadership most suited for change, creativity, and innovation and this framework provides an in-depth guide to inclusive leadership from the perspective of verified inclusive leaders grounded in theory.

An additional significant contribution of this study, derived from the synthesis of participant quotes and literature supporting the components of the Inclusive Empathy Model, is the creation of the Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model (Figure 12).

The Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model serves the aim of the study, which is to provide a guide that supports the emergence of inclusive organisational brand leadership. It complements the Inclusive Empathy Model (Figure 11) by addressing a significant gap in the literature regarding the precursors to empathy, making this model a significant contribution.

While the literature reviewed highlights the value of empathy, it insufficiently covers its precursors. The participants experienced personal and professional challenges, cultural exposure, and mentorship, that shaped their journey to inclusive leadership. In cases where a leader has not been similarly exposed, this model enables them to cultivate the beliefs, values, and practises that support inclusive organisational brand leadership.

The Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model begins with the self, encompassing self-awareness, self-understanding, self-regulation, self-acceptance, and self-worth. Through this process, the inclusive leader emerges authentically and operates with greater integrity, demonstrating authenticity through vulnerability, which, in turn, creates a learning state. This learning state gives rise to empathy, which is expressed through active listening, symmetrical communication, open dialogue, and timely constructive feedback. Open dialogue and feedback further help the participant refine their empathy.

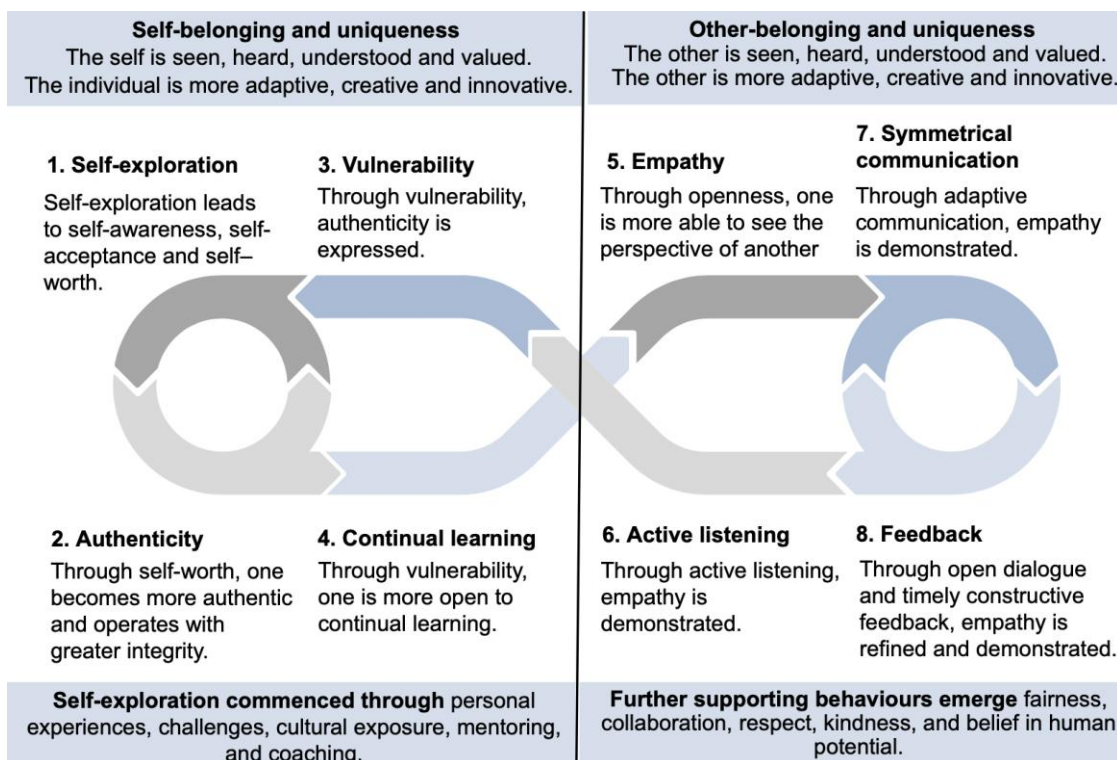


Figure 12: Sequential path to inclusive organisational brand leadership model (Constructed by researcher)

In essence, the participants first needed to see, hear, and value themselves before they could create the conditions for others to feel seen, heard, understood, and valued. Active demonstration, particularly through listening, communication, and dialogue skills, is key to this process and further serves to refine the participants' empathetic practices. Further supporting behaviours begin to emerge, namely fairness, collaboration, respect, kindness, and belief in human potential.

Ultimately, this progression nurtures both personal and collective adaptability, cultivating a culture where both belonging and individuality are valued, thereby creating a fertile environment for change, creativity, and innovation.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will delve deeper into the significance of the findings in relation to the research questions and their societal implications. It will also address the limitations and methodological constraints of the study, before offering recommendations for policy and practice informed by the results. Finally, it will conclude with suggestions for further research.

This study explored inclusive organisational brand leadership through the lens of inclusive leadership as the means of transmitting brand promises via employee engagement, internal branding, and brand citizenship behaviour that encompass an inclusive organisational brand. Inclusive leaders are therefore inclusive organisational brand leaders. Figure 13 illustrates the influence of inclusive leadership on an inclusive organisational brand.

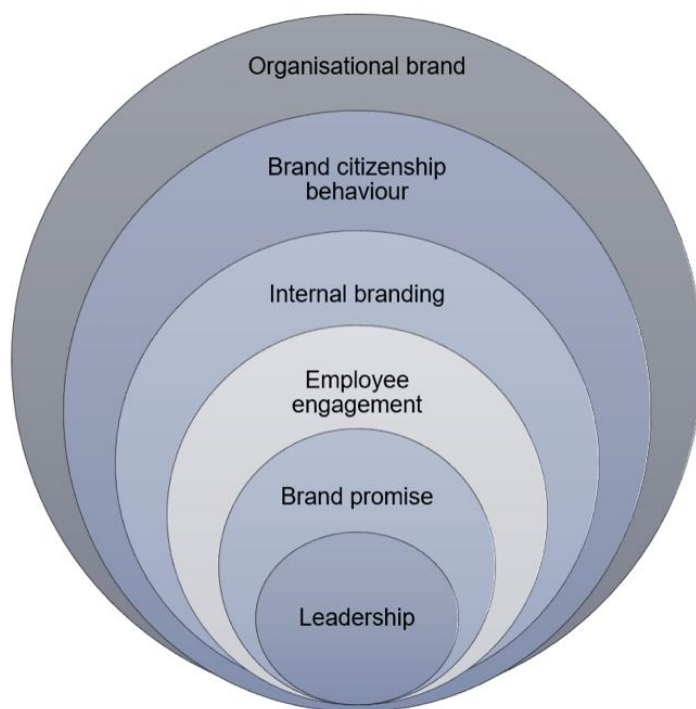


Figure 13: Influence of inclusive leadership on an inclusive organisational brand (Constructed by researcher)

5.2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS IN RELATION TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Grasping the significance of the findings is important to understanding how they address the research questions for this study. This section will explore the significance of the findings and their contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

The literature affirms that contemporary organisational brand leadership must evolve beyond traditional paradigms, with inclusive organisational brand leadership emerging as critical for enabling innovation, creativity, psychological safety, and brand citizenship behaviours. However, inclusive leadership, as it is conceptualised in the literature, presents certain caveats. The current complex climate calls for inclusive leaders who have elements of transactional and transformational approaches, such as is found in transformational, entrepreneurial, responsible, ethical, and service-centric leadership styles. This necessitates a reconceptualisation of the elements to form an integrative model. The suggested model intends to be a dynamic, mediated process that offers practical frameworks for leaders navigating brand-aligned transformation to fuel innovation and change. It offers a guide for organisational brand leaders transitioning from traditional to contemporary organisational brand leadership approaches.

5.2.1. What is inclusive organisational brand leadership?

Existing leadership theory was used to benchmark the research findings and answer the research question regarding what inclusive organisational brand leadership is.

Inclusive organisational brand leadership centres on cultivating empathy, building genuine relationships, and fostering a culture where all stakeholders feel respected and empowered to share their unique views (Marathe *et al.*, 2017; Praveenadevi & Girimurugan, 2019; Mehmood *et al.*, 2021; Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). By prioritising empathy, inclusive organisational brand leaders create

environments where individuals feel seen, heard, understood, and valued, thereby nurturing a culture of inclusion that appreciates diverse perspectives (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2016; Odor, 2018; Yikilmaz, 2023).

Empathy, a core value among inclusive organisational brand leaders, is a key component of Emotional Intelligence that enables organisational brand leaders to step outside themselves, suspend personal biases, actively listen, and understand the thoughts and emotions of others (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021; Vukadinović, 2022; Malambe & Toendepi, 2023). Empathy makes organisational brand leaders more approachable and relatable. Moreover, it strengthens human connections, builds trust, and enhances team collaboration (Javed *et al.*, 2019; Younas *et al.* 2020b; Lei *et al.*, 2023). Empathetic organisational brand leaders are also more effective at conflict resolution by considering multiple perspectives and facilitating constructive outcomes (Marathe *et al.*, 2017). Empathy also promotes respect, thereby creating an environment that is more accepting of diversity and encourages feedback focused on growth rather than punishment (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022; Vukadinović, 2022).

The research findings affirm existing definitions of inclusive organisational brand leadership and highlight the central role of empathy. However, the current literature insufficiently addresses the role of the organisational brand leader in both cultivating and sustaining inclusion, intrinsically and extrinsically, across various industries and organisational structures. It highlights mediators such as psychological empowerment and safety, but often assumes linear causality from leadership behaviour to employee outcomes, overlooking reciprocal and systemic influences.

There also seemed to be a gap in the knowledge regarding strategic competencies, such as charismatic communication (essential for change efficacy) and feedback loops, constructively challenging employee performance, and innovation role-modelling, which is arguably necessary for innovation and creativity.

1. Stakeholder trust, cultivated through charismatic communication that envisions, energises, and enables, is essential in complex environments (Men et al., 2020).
2. Leadership possibility is realised through recipient resonance, activation or trigger, and supported by multiple feedback loops (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021).
3. The effect of psychological-safety on innovative work behaviours is diminished in the face of decreased challenge-related stress (Yikilmaz, 2023).
4. Entrepreneurial leaders are described as 'risk-takers, creative, visionary and motivational' (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021:435). They role model the exploration of new business ideas and opportunities (Mehmood *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, the concept of empathy remains underexplored within these frameworks. As a result, conventional definitions do not yet meet the needs of optimal inclusive organisational brand leadership, which necessitated a redefinition of how empathy is presented in the literature in relation to inclusive leadership.

The Inclusive Empathy Model (Figure 11) recontextualises empathy by integrating participant insights with theoretical perspectives, thereby addressing the caveats in the literature regarding the conceptualisation of inclusive leadership. This model represents a contribution by highlighting that empathy is first and foremost experiential, and can be developed through intentional empathetic practises. It offers a practical integrated guide for organisational brand leaders who are aiming to cultivate inclusive organisational brand leadership that is optimally suited for change and innovation. Therefore, the presentation of the model fulfils the primary aim of this study.

Caveats in existing definitions are addressed by adding feedback loops through open dialogue and feedback, enabling charismatic communication through

symmetrical communication and active listening, marginalising challenge partially through a belief in human potential, and innovating role-modelling partially through integrity, vulnerability, and continuous learning.

The Sequential Path to Inclusive organisational Brand Leadership Model (Figure 12) complements the Inclusive Empathy Model by identifying self-exploration and authenticity as precursors to integrity, vulnerability and continual learning, which activate empathetic practices that include active listening, symmetrical communication, intentional dialogue, and timely constructive feedback.

To answer the research question regarding what inclusive organisational brand leadership is, the research conclude that it is experiential, enacted through active listening, symmetrical communication, intentional dialogue, and timely constructive feedback. It believes in human potential, and it role models integrity, vulnerability, and continuous learning.

5.2.2. What enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader?

The literature leaves a gap regarding the antecedent conditions that enable leaders to embody inclusive empathetic practices authentically rather than performatively. It also seems to underemphasise the mediators that facilitate authentic transitions from transactional paradigms to inclusive practices. The emotional agility that is required to realise these inclusive organisational brand leadership competencies could also be explored in more depth. While Emotional Intelligence (EI) is acknowledged as foundational to trust-building, leader-centric mechanisms such as empathy, morality, trust, self-validation and self-inclusion that underpin the emotional agility that is needed to bridge theory and practice, reveal further opportunities for study.

Through the research, the question regarding ways in which inclusion can be supported by an organisational brand leader, could be answered.

The journey of participants to acquire inclusive empathy generally centred on three key elements, namely personal experiences and mentorship, beliefs and values, and cultural exposure.

1. Exposure to diverse experiences and environments, including the influence of family and mentors, played a significant role in shaping their capacity for inclusive empathy. Personal challenges such as navigating biases and overcoming low self-worth contributed to this development, including the support of mentors.
2. To cultivate an inclusive empathetic mindset, participants held foundational beliefs in human potential and the importance of treating all people with respect.
3. Key values that were identified included that of authenticity, kindness, and integrity. Participants particularly emphasised authenticity. They noted that being comfortable with themselves created space for deeper human connection.
4. Cultural exposure that involves active engagement with different cultures was another important precursor to inclusive empathy. This engagement enhanced the need for understanding and sensitivity to the perspectives of others, which are vital for the development of inclusive empathy.

Once the conditions for inclusive empathy cultivation were established, participants actively demonstrated their inclusive empathetic mindset through behaviours such as active listening and effective communication, creating safe spaces, continuous learning, and self-reflection.

1. Inclusive empathetic interactions require skills centred on active listening, symmetrical communication, and emotional sensitivity. These inclusive organisational that brand leaders create environments where others feel safe to express perspectives and engage in open dialogue to make psychological safety a deliberate pursuit rather than merely an outcome.
2. Continuous learning and self-reflection are integral to their development. They actively seek feedback to better understand how

they are perceived, to identify potential biases, and improve their inclusive empathetic responses.

3. Embracing vulnerability enables open dialogue that further supports inclusive empathy.
4. Inclusive organisational brand leadership practices that prioritise respect, fairness, and collaboration naturally nurture an inclusive, empathetic organisational culture.

While inclusive empathy is central to inclusive organisational brand leadership, an inclusive empathetic mindset comprises three components, namely precursors to empathy, supporters of empathy, and inclusive empathetic practices.

The literature affirms transformational and inclusive styles for change navigation, but seemingly idealises endpoints, and under-explores processes. The contribution of this study that emerged from the synthesis of participant insights and the literature, is the Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model (Figure 12). The model complements the Inclusive Empathy Model by addressing the gap in the literature concerning the precursors of inclusive empathy. It provides a guide to support the emergence of inclusive organisational brand leadership and represents an advancement in the field.

The research revealed that authenticity facilitates the emergence of inclusive empathy in organisational brand leaders, thereby enabling inclusive empathetic practices to emerge. Participants described a sequential path to inclusive organisational brand leadership that begins with the self. Through deep inner exploration, organisational brand leaders cultivated self-worth by understanding and accepting more facets of themselves (self-acceptance or self-inclusion). This authenticity, expressed through vulnerability, increased openness to learning and cultivated empathy. The participants needed to see, hear, understand, and value themselves before creating conditions for others to feel similarly seen, heard, understood, and valued.

The literature highlights psychological empowerment and safety as mediators of inclusive organisational brand leadership, but their reciprocal, leader-first cultivation remained underexplored. Self-inclusion, in particular, emerged as an underexamined antecedent, potentially bridging leaders' internal integration with organisational innovation. The internal integration of a leader shapes cultures that are conducive to stakeholder-centric innovation.

In conclusion, to answer the research question about what enables and supports inclusion in an organisational brand leader, authenticity achieved through self-exploration serves as the key mediator enabling the development and enactment of inclusive empathy that underpins inclusive organisational brand leadership.

5.3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS IN RELATION TO ORGANISATIONS

The findings make a case for inclusive organisational brand leadership to be the style of organisational brand leadership best suited for navigating change, fostering creativity, managing complexity and driving innovation. The research questions were addressed, and a new academic model of inclusive organisational brand leadership are provided, titled the 'Inclusive Empathy Model', and a guide to inclusive organisational brand leadership, titled the 'Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model'. Finally, the findings highlight that despite the diverse circumstances and behaviours that organisational brand leaders may exhibit, if an organisational brand leader aims to be inclusive, they could focus on self-exploration simultaneous to developing the skills that support inclusion.

Organisational brand leaders create and manage culture, which needs constant investment and continuous attention (Laloux, 2014). 'A true leader takes responsibility and ownership for culture changes' (Hamilton, 2024:100). Laloux (2014) applies Ken Wilber's four-quadrant model to organisations and defines culture as an integrated blend of four components, namely the interior individual that involves the challenging of beliefs and mindsets, the exterior individual that

refers to role modelling of moral behaviour, the exterior collective that encompasses organisational systems, structures, processes, and practices, and the interior collective that represents the underlying organisational culture. The first three quadrants create the last, specifically the exterior collective. 'Culture value transmission must happen at every level of the organisation for it to have a chance of happening' (Hamilton, 2024:100).

Laloux (2014) highlights three practices that aspiring teal organisations could adopt: an advice process that decentralises decision-making by soliciting input from affected stakeholders; a conflict resolution tool where individuals address disagreements one-on-one before involving a mutually agreed mediator; and a peer-driven salary and evaluation system in which colleagues review one another and determine fair compensation. Additionally, organisations could consider to implement a bill of employee rights and responsibilities, cultivate warm and welcoming office environments, adopt well-designed meeting practices, recruit for cultural fit, and provide clear onboarding processes that include the founding story and purpose of the organisation that is distinguished from the founder's personal purpose.

Laloux's (2014) insights on the new type of teal organisations were based on a review of over fifty organisations that employ at least one hundred people and that have been operating for a minimum of five years. He describes them as operating from a higher level of consciousness. They are purpose driven, collaborative and self-organising, and emulate the adaptive and evolutionary aspects of nature. Teal organisations operate through distributed authority. They focus on the wholeness of employees, encourage the integration of professional and personal identities, and promote well-being and authenticity. Teal organisations operate through collective intelligence, where employees feel empowered to hold each other accountable through feedback. Moreover, they treat failure and problems as opportunities for learning and growth. They also strive to understand the impact of each decision on all stakeholders (Laloux, 2014).

The Inclusive Empathy Model and the Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model that were created from this research, pave the way for not only organisational brand leaders, but all employees to begin creating the conditions that are necessary for the next evolution of organisations. 'In most companies, the culture simply reflects the assumptions, norms, and concerns of the organisation's founders or leaders. From an Evolutionary-Teal perspective, an organisation is a living organism with its own life force, and it should be allowed to have its own autonomous culture, distinct from the assumptions and concerns of its founders and leaders' (Laloux, 2014:232). '(T)he future belongs to organisations where 'hard' and 'soft' aspects work hand in hand and reinforce each other in service of the organisation's purpose' (Laloux, 2014:234).

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organisation serves as the ultimate role model. By choosing to relinquish the addiction to power and distribute it instead, the organisational brand leader sets the tone for the entire culture, as 'the levels of consciousness of an organisation cannot exceed the level of consciousness of its leader' (Laloux, 2014:239). CEO's who operate from wholeness and values such as authenticity, trust, humility, vulnerability, courage and candour, invite others to risk wholeness (Laloux, 2014). In instances where the paradigm of top organisational brand leadership, owners, and the board is not aligned with teal practices, the Inclusive Empathy Model and the Sequential Path to Inclusive Organisational Brand Leadership Model can serve as a bridge to prepare organisations for the moment they are ready to adopt a teal perspective.

5.4. THE LIMITATIONS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

The number of participants interviewed was limited. Future research would benefit from interviewing a larger and more diverse sample, particularly by including participants from rural and non-metropolitan areas, and by increasing the representation of men. Additionally, incorporating a broader racial and demographic mix, more reflective of South Africa and its neighbouring countries, would enhance the external validity of the research findings.

The literature review concluded that leading change and stimulating creativity require various transformational leadership styles, strategic and entrepreneurial leadership skills, and a high level of communication and Emotional Intelligence (EI) competence, particularly empathy and self-inclusion or self-acceptance. Inclusive organisational brand leadership was identified as the style best suited to promoting innovative work behaviour, enhancing adaptability, and leading change, establishing it as the focus of this research.

The research findings revealed that inclusive organisational brand leaders possess qualities associated with various transformational leadership styles. They also demonstrate high levels of communication and EI competence, in particular empathy and self-inclusion expressed through authenticity. However, the findings did not provide insights into the level of strategic and entrepreneurial skills possessed by each participant.

Additionally, the literature highlighted the value of appropriately challenging employees to bring out the best in them. The findings echoed this through the participants' belief in human potential and their desire to see their teams reach their potential.

Inclusive cultures proved to be the best type of culture to support change readiness, adaptability and innovative work behaviour. Inclusive organisational brand leadership is the style most conducive to promoting an inclusive culture through empathetic practices, and particularly, free flowing information via open dialogues. Human resource practices and governance structures were recognised as instrumental in shaping cultures that enhance brand citizenship behaviour. The research did not focus on assessing the organisational culture, examining executive leadership across the organisation – who are most culturally influential – or evaluating the systemic governance human resource practices that support inclusive cultures. Any claims of cultural influence made in this study are therefore interpretative rather than empirical.

Finally, this study does not claim causal generalisability, cross-industry representativeness, or applicability to leaders at various developmental stages. Furthermore, the identified gaps in the literature do not reflect the complete body of knowledge, but rather the literature that the researcher reviewed.

5.5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTISES ARISING FROM THE STUDY

The Inclusive Empathy Model and the Sequential Path to Inclusive organisational Brand Leadership Model could be considered for adoption by all organisations, with particular focus on training, coaching and developing organisational brand leaders to embrace empathetic practices and to engage in self-exploration.

The empathetic practices encompass the skills of inclusion, specifically developing empathy as a skill, as well as behaviours that support self-inclusion. Organisations could invest in organisational brand leadership facilitation, coaching, and mentoring to develop these capabilities. Additionally, they might consistently solicit consistent feedback from all individuals within their organisations to ensure information flows freely through open, constructive dialogue, active listening, and symmetrical communication.

During the organisational brand leadership development process and during the solicitation of feedback, it would be of value to identify the techniques most effective in supporting organisational brand leaders in cultivating empathy, given its significance in complex times. However, the outcome may be a combination of techniques, as highlighted in the Inclusive Empathy Model.

5.6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Different aspects of inclusive empathy may be more pronounced at certain ages and could develop sequentially. Understanding this developmental sequence is important, and further research is needed to determine whether enabling factors for inclusive empathy precede the development of inclusive empathy skills, which in turn are followed by supporting behaviours of inclusive empathy.

Additionally, results varied across genders and different ethnic groups. The white ethnic group appear to place the lowest, overall and within the individual categories. The Indian ethnic group placed highest in the 'Factors mediating inclusion' and 'Skills for inclusion' categories, but not in the 'Supporting behaviours' category. On average, across all three code categories by gender, the female gender group placed significantly higher than the male gender group. However, in the 'Skills for inclusion' category, their lead was only marginal – significantly narrower than the substantial gaps observed in other categories.

It would be valuable to conduct further research to explore possible underlying reasons for discrepancies that would inform a more tailored strategy for cultivating inclusion across ethnicities and genders.

The job function and level of an organisational brand leader may influence their ability to empathise inclusively. For instance, stakeholder-focused roles tended to achieve higher overall placements. When examining specific aspects of inclusive empathy, supporting behaviours were more prevalent in senior-level roles, while skills for inclusion were notably prominent among executives. Factors mediating inclusion, in contrast, appeared to be largely individual and personal. These patterns suggest a possible link between role characteristics and inclusive empathy outcomes. However, further research is needed to validate these findings.

Similarly, it may be valuable to explore why multinational companies tend to place higher in the 'Skills for inclusion' and 'Supporting behaviours' code categories, while national companies placed higher in the 'Factors mediating inclusion' category.

Additionally, the role of regions warrants further investigation, as the KwaZulu-Natal region is placed the highest overall in all three code categories. The 'Skills for inclusion' category appears evenly distributed across metropolitan areas, but KwaZulu-Natal dominates the 'Factors mediating inclusion' category, and shares the highest placement with Western Cape in the 'Supporting behaviours' of

empathy' category. A deeper understanding of regional differences could be expanded to include neighbouring countries and more remote regions. This could enable the identification of similarities and differences in findings to enhance the generalisability of the study.

The research insights did reveal that inclusive organisational brand leaders do have the qualities required of various transformational leadership styles mentioned – high levels of communication and EI competence. They did not, however, provide insight into the level of strategic and entrepreneurial skill possessed by each participant. This would be an area for further research, as these qualities may be essential additional skills required by inclusive organisational brand leaders.

Finally, although inclusive organisational brand leadership was identified as the style best suited to promote an inclusive culture through empathetic practices – and inclusive cultures are seen as the most effective for supporting change readiness, adaptability, and innovative work behaviour – the research did not examine organisational culture, the influence of executive organisational brand leadership across the organisation, or the systemic human resource practices that enable inclusive environments. These areas warrant further investigation, as having only a few inclusive organisational brand leaders may be insufficient to drive innovation without broader organisational brand leadership commitment and organisation-wide inclusive practices.

5.7. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that inclusive organisational brand leadership, grounded in inclusive empathy, respect, authenticity, and a belief in human potential, is fundamentally experiential and requires high Emotional Intelligence (EI). Inclusive empathetic practices such as active listening, symmetrical communication, open dialogue, and timely constructive feedback create environments where collaboration thrives, individuals feel valued, and innovation aligns with organisational goals.

EI, comprising intra- and interpersonal skills, predicts job performance, organisational brand leadership effectiveness, organisational success, health, and well-being. It can be developed through targeted training, coaching, and mentoring (Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017; Anand *et al.*, 2023; Balti & Karoui Zouaoui, 2024). Emotionally intelligent organisational brand leaders possess self-validation, enabling them to focus on employee development, build trust, and foster adaptability, creativity, and innovation.

Organisations aiming for inclusivity could invest in developing organisational brand leadership EI and self-validation that align with Wood's (2020) emphasis on self-healing and Laloux's (2014) teal organisations designed for complexity. Emotional agility through self-awareness is crucial for effective organisational brand leadership (David & Congleton, 2022).

This study highlights EI and inclusive empathy as essential, cultivable competences for effective organisational brand leadership and sustainable organisational success. It identifies self-validation and authenticity as foundational to inclusive cultures that promote equity and innovation. Its original contribution lies in articulating the inward-outward organisational brand leadership transformation – from self-awareness to self-validation and self-acceptance (self-inclusion) – and from authentic self-expression to empathetic inclusion, linking individual psychological growth to systemic organisational impact. Genuine inclusion emerges only when organisational brand leaders integrate their authentic selves, embodying humility and empathy that allows the uniqueness of others to thrive within a shared sense of belonging.

Interviewees were authentic leaders who believe that embracing authenticity cultivates a deeper understanding of others and grants freedom for authentic self-expression. Wood (2020) describes this transformation as progressing from EI through mindfulness and self-awareness to the authentic use of unique abilities, marking a shift from materialism to collective self-mastery.

Organisational brand leaders grounded in self-acceptance demonstrated non-attached self-reflection that enables learning and growth. This is consistent with the view of Floricica and Tasente (2022), of self-acceptance as a catalyst for change. This process involves awareness of strengths and limitations without judgement but with self-respect (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2015; Schaap & Dippenaar, 2017). Individual worth is intrinsic, discovered through inward self-connection, fostering self-worth that manifests as authentic behaviour. This authenticity inspires others to embrace their uniqueness, thereby accelerating innovation. True authenticity requires internal integration before genuine external expression, and to naturally embody humility and empathy that would nurture inclusive environments.

Inclusive organisational brand leaders promote both belonging and uniqueness; however, it is their own authenticity that enables the uniqueness of others to emerge, thereby bridging the gap to belonging and creating genuine inclusion. At its core, inclusive organisational brand leadership cultivates a state of belonging, in which employees feel seen, heard and valued through active listening, symmetrical communication, open dialogue and feedback. Further supporting behaviours include fairness, collaboration, respect, kindness, and belief in human potential. Environmental factors that support employees in realising their potential include access to information, training, development, role clarity, and constructive challenge.

This dual focus – on others through the self – reflects Peck's (1983) concept of love as an intentional act for another's best interests, a principle central across various cultures and religions. The capacity to enact this awareness gives rise to empathy and inclusive practices. This research reframes inclusive organisational brand leadership as an ethical, relational practice rooted in universal principles of love, respect, and self-worth. Inclusion is an act of will grounded in self-love and authenticity – a paradigm shift with significant implications for organisational brand leadership development, coaching and organisational change.

Self-awareness develops uniquely through mentorship, coaching, challenges, cultural exposure, and feedback. Organisational brand leaders seeking transformation can adopt diverse methods. For those aiming to create stakeholder-centric innovation – the future model for business – transformation must begin within.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a benchmark for inclusive organisational brand leadership research and practice, emphasising that stakeholder-centric innovation and organisational success depend on an organisational brand leaders' inward journey of self-awareness before external transformation. It provides a foundational framework for cultivating organisational brand leaders equipped to navigate the current complex, diverse world with integrity, compassion, and visionary inclusion.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical clearance application



Our Ref: M. 420924
Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za

06 September 2024



Outcome of Ethics Clearance Application for Doctor of Philosophy in Strategic Brand Leadership.



Student name: Wendy Mahoney
Student number: [REDACTED]
Brand and campus: IIEVega



Dear Wendy,

Thank you for submitting the ethics clearance application for the study: *Exploring what Mediates and Supports Inclusion in a Brand Leader as the Leadership Style Most Suited for Change and Innovation:*



We are pleased to inform you that your ethical clearance application has been approved with minor revision. This means that you may proceed with data collection once you have addressed the issues raised by the Higher Degree Committee to the satisfaction of your supervisors. If you are collecting data from a specific organisation, ensure that you have a gatekeeper's letter that confirms their approval of the data collection being done.

You are reminded to inform the IIE's Higher Degrees Committee of any changes made to the research methodology or title of the research prior to examination. Kindly ensure that all ethical considerations are duly applied whilst collecting, analysing and interpreting the data for the completion of your research. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your programme team or supervisor directly.

All the best with your research.



Dr Reza Hosseini
Deputy Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies
The Independent Institute of Education



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Appendix B: Sample of interview structure

Section A: Introduction to and purpose of study	
Greeting and introduction to the interviewer	"Good day, my name is Wendy Mahoney, I own a change management consultancy focused on culture change for innovation, I additionally chair the Kwa-Zulu Natal province for Business Engage NPC and am finalising my PHD on inclusive organisational brand leadership."
Purpose of Interview	"The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the journey to inclusive organisational brand leadership. You have been awarded an Inclusive Leader Award by Business Engage NPC. Your journey is therefore important to us to better understand inclusive organisational brand leadership."
Section B: Permission to record	
Request to Record	"May I please have your permission to record and transcribe this interview for research purposes? I assure you that this data will remain confidential, your name will not be placed on any published document, and you may receive a copy of the recording."
Section C: Start of open-ended interview questions	
	"Tell me about the major milestones in your journey to leadership?"
	"Tell me about the major milestones in your journey to inclusive leadership?"
	"In your opinion what behaviours supported your inclusive leadership journey?"
	"In your opinion what behaviours support your inclusive leadership style?"
	"In your opinion what skills supported your inclusive leadership journey?"
	"In your opinion what skills support your leadership style?"
	"In your opinion what beliefs supported your inclusive leadership journey?"

	"In your opinion what beliefs support your inclusive leadership style?"
	"In your opinion what values supported your inclusive leadership journey?"
	"In your opinion what values support your inclusive leadership style?"
	"Of everything shared today, what is the one thing that most enabled your journey to inclusive leadership?"
	"Do you have any final guidance for aspiring inclusive leaders?"
	("Tell me more", may be used after any response, to more deeply explore a response.)
Section D: Interview close and thanks	
	"Thank you very much for being so generous with your time and for supporting the field of inclusive organisational brand leadership through your answers. All data obtained will remain confidential, no names will be disclosed and only insights will be reported on. You may receive a copy of this interview for your records and will be sent a copy of the final report. Do you have any questions?"

Appendix C: 23 Finalists for the Inclusive Leader Award

Year	No	Interview	Category	Industry	Region	Ethnicity	Gender	Age
2024	1	2-09-2024 14:30-15:30	Multinational Listed Company	Tobacco	Western Cape	Brazilian	Female	38-43
2024	2	18-09-2024 11:00-12:00	Multinational Listed Company	Industrial Technology	Gauteng	Indian	Female	44-49
2024	3	16-09-2024 15:00-16:00	National	Financial Services	Gauteng	Black	Female	38-43
2024	4	20-08-2024 16:00-17:00	Multinational Listed Company	Telecommunication	Gauteng	Black	Female	44-49
2024	5	11-09-2024 14:30-15:30	Multinational Listed Company	Consulting and Technology Services	Gauteng	Black	Female	38-43
2024	6	19-09-2024 12:30-13:30	Entrepreneur	Medical	Eastern Cape	Indian	Female	44-49
2022	7	23-09-2024 09:00-10:00	National	Financial Services	Kwa-Zulu Natal	White	Female	56-61
2020	8	26-09-2024 14:30-15:30	National	Legal	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Indian	Female	44-49
2024	9	1-10-2024 9:30-10:30	Entrepreneur	Financial Services	Gauteng	Black	Male	38-43
2022 & 2021	10	1-10-2024 11:00-12:00	Multinational	Management Consulting	Western Cape	Black	Male	50-55
2024	11	2-10-2024 8:00-9:00	National	Maritime and Defence	Kwa-Zulu Natal	Indian	Female	32-37
2024	12	4-10-2024 10:30-11:30	Multinational Listed Company	Mining and Commodities	Gauteng	Indian	Female	44-49
2023	13	4-10-2024 14:00-15:00	University	Education	Bloemfontein	Black	Male	38-43
2021	14	14-10-2024 11:00-12:00	National Listed Company	Financial Services	Gauteng	White	Female	38-43

2020	15	17-10-2024 14:30-15:30	Entrepreneur	Consulting and Training	Western Cape	White	Female	50-55
2023 & 2022	16	22-10-2024 10:00-11:00	Multinational Listed Company	Financial Services	Gauteng	Indian	Male	44-49
2024	17	23-10-2024 8:00-9:00	Non-Profit Company	Training and Development	Botswana	Black	Male	32-37
2022	18	28-10-2024 11:00-12:00	Multinational Listed Company	Food Manufacturing	Gauteng	Coloured	Female	44-49
2021	19	29-10-2024 10:00-11:00	Entrepreneur	Management Consulting	Western Cape	White	Female	44-49
2024	20	5-11-2024 10:00-11:00	Multinational Listed Company	Energy and Chemicals	Gauteng	Black	Female	44-49
2022	21	8-11-2024 12:30-13:30	National Listed Company	Financial Services	Lusaka	Black	Female	50-55
2021	22	25-11-2024 14:30-15:30	National	Transportation	Gauteng	Indian	Female	44-49
2023	23	22-01-2025 10:00-11:00	Multinational Listed Company	Retail	Western Cape	Coloured	Female	56-61

Appendix D: Business Engage consent letter



Business Engage Association NPC: Registration no. 2005/021365/08

20-08-2024

IIE Vega

To whom it may concern

Wendy Mahoney PhD research

Wendy Mahoney, who leads our KZN movement, is currently conducting her PhD research, through your institution. As part of her study she wishes to carry out semi-structured interviews with past Inclusive Leader award recipients, under Business Engage, from the last four years.

Her plan is to conduct one-hour interviews with each Inclusive Leader award recipient to explore their journey to inclusive leadership. Wendy believes that inclusive leadership is the most suitable style for navigating complexity, change, and innovation; however, leaders need guidance on how to cultivate inclusion.

Business Engage grants Wendy consent to connect with individual Leadership Award recipients over the last four-year period. This research is fully supported by Business Engage, and we will provide Wendy access to Business Engage's award recipient database, which consists of publicly available information, and we have been further assured that individual responses will be anonymized in the research process.

We wish Wendy well with her research, confident in the knowledge that her work will add value to both the academic research environment as well as to leaders and leadership practitioners.

Warm regards,



Colleen Larsen
CEO
Business Engage

Appendix E: Atlas.ti

[Atlas.ti Quotation Manager](#)

Appendix F: Editor's letter

Tenley Voogt

[REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Date: 29 October 2025

To Whom It May Concern,

I hereby confirm that I, Tenley Voogt, have provided editorial services for the PhD thesis:

Entitled: "Exploring Mediating Factors and Support Mechanisms in the Emergence of Inclusive Brand Leadership Optimal for Innovation and Change"

Author: Wendy Mahoney

Student Number: [REDACTED]

Institution: Vega

My work included proofreading and language editing to improve grammar, spelling, punctuation, academic style, readability, and consistency throughout the document. No changes were made to the author's research content, data interpretation, or academic findings.

The editing was completed in accordance with the university's guidelines on editorial assistance and academic integrity.

Should you require further information, please feel free to contact me at the details provided above.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Tenley Voogt

ANNEXURES

Annexure H: Participant informed consent form



Annexure H – PARTICIPANT OR RESPONDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants
To whom it may concern, My name is Wendy Mahoney and I am a student at The IIE's Vega School I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr Sean Mc Coy and Dr Corne Davis about what enables and supports Inclusion in a leader as Inclusive Leadership has been identified as the most suited style of leadership for innovation and complex and uncertain times, I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of organisational brand leadership for changing times. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.
What will I be doing if I participate in your study?
I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you have previously been nominated as an Inclusive Leader by Business Engage. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to interview you for one hour to better understand what enabled you to cultivate inclusion within your leadership style. You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.
Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?
Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your Inclusive Leadership style, what precipitated the cultivation of Inclusion within you as well as enabled any perceived behaviours and skills. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating. Detail the potential risks and how it will be managed by the researcher. Indicate how the ethical considerations will be applied in the context of the study.
Do I have to participate in the study?
• Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary; • If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;

- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at the IIE's Vega School, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my PHD. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

Wendy Mahoney

082 454 0562

wendy@newmella.co.za

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Dr Sean Mc Coy

082 558 5080

smccoy@hklimgroup.com

Dr Corne Davis

082 411 3339

cdavis@uj.ac.za

Participant or respondent Informed Consent – Audio and Visual Recordings.		
I agree to participate in the research conducted by Wendy Mahoney about my Inclusive Leadership style, what precipitated the cultivation of Inclusion within me, as well as any perceived enabling behaviours and skills. This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that: • I agree to participate in this research and be recorded for the purpose of data collection. • My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private and confidential. • My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research. • I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview. • I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected. <table border="1"><tr><td>Signature</td><td>Date</td></tr></table>	Signature	Date
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