

The Determinants of Inclusive Work Environment; A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Inclusive work environments have gained increasing attention as organizations seek to move beyond workforce diversity toward practices that ensure fairness, belonging, and meaningful participation for all employees. Although research on workplace inclusion has expanded rapidly, evidence on its determinants remains dispersed across disciplines, sectors, and methodological approaches, limiting cumulative understanding. This systematic review aims to synthesize existing empirical evidence on the determinants of inclusive work environments and to identify the key outcomes associated with inclusion at employee, organizational, and social levels. A systematic review design was employed following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Peer-reviewed empirical studies and evidence-based reviews examining workplace inclusion were identified through structured database searches. Eligible studies were screened, selected, and analyzed using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data were extracted and thematically synthesized to categorize determinants and outcomes of inclusive work environments. The review identifies three interrelated categories of determinants shaping inclusive work environments: behavioral determinants, particularly leadership behaviors and interpersonal relations; organizational determinants, including inclusive climates, human resource practices, and policies; and contextual and structural determinants related to sectoral, institutional, and societal conditions. Inclusive work environments are consistently associated with positive employee-level outcomes such as engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being, as well as organizational outcomes including innovation, performance, and retention. Broader social and equity-related benefits are also evident across sectors. Inclusive work environments emerge from the interaction of behavioral, organizational, and contextual determinants rather than isolated initiatives. The findings highlight the need for integrated and sustained strategies that align leadership practices, organizational systems, and contextual conditions. This systematic review provides an evidence-based foundation to guide future research, inform organizational practice, and support policy development aimed at advancing inclusive workplaces.

1. Introduction

An inclusive work environment has become a central concern for contemporary organizations as workplaces grow more diverse in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and professional roles. Inclusion goes beyond the numerical representation of diverse groups and refers to the extent to which employees experience fair treatment, meaningful involvement in decision-making, and a sense of belonging while maintaining their individual uniqueness at work. Empirical evidence indicates that when employees perceive their work environment as inclusive, they are more likely to feel valued and engaged in their roles (Borisov & Vinogradov, 2022). Recent research emphasizes that workplace inclusion is a multidimensional construct shaped by several interrelated determinants. Leadership has been consistently identified as a key behavioral driver of inclusion, as leaders influence how policies are enacted, how differences are acknowledged, and how employee voice is encouraged. Inclusive leadership practices have been shown to promote psychological safety and trust, which in turn enhance employee engagement and positive work attitudes (Siyal, 2023). Ethical leadership has also been linked to stronger perceptions of cultural inclusion and improved discretionary job behaviors, highlighting the importance of leadership values in fostering inclusive environments (Haar & Brougham, 2022).

In addition to leadership behaviors, organizational structures and practices play a crucial role in shaping inclusive work environments. Human resource management systems that emphasize fairness, access to opportunities, and supportive policies contribute to the development of inclusive climates. Strategic human resource management has been identified as a powerful mechanism for embedding inclusion within organizational processes by aligning recruitment, training, performance management, and career development with inclusion goals (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024). Organizational climates that explicitly support inclusion further reinforce employees' perceptions that diversity is valued and respected (Li et al., 2022). Workplace inclusion is also influenced by psychological and social factors that operate at the interpersonal level. Feelings of belongingness, trust among colleagues, and psychological safety enable employees to express themselves without fear of negative consequences. Research shows that interpersonal trust and vulnerability are essential for sustaining inclusive climates, particularly in professional and service-oriented settings (Richards, 2025). The satisfaction of belongingness needs has similarly been associated with stronger affective commitment and reduced turnover intentions in inclusive workplaces (Santarpia et al., 2024).

Beyond internal organizational dynamics, inclusion is shaped by contextual and sectoral conditions. Studies conducted in public administration, healthcare, education, and private sector organizations demonstrate that inclusion is interpreted and implemented differently depending on institutional norms, professional cultures, and societal expectations. Evidence from public sector organizations highlights how inclusive leadership and supportive structures enhance employee voice and participation, particularly among historically marginalized groups (Alang et al., 2022). Sector-specific challenges further underscore the importance of contextualizing inclusion within broader social and institutional environments (McCandless et al., 2022). Despite the growing volume of research on workplace inclusion, the literature remains fragmented. Existing studies often focus on isolated determinants such as

leadership style, organizational climate, or human resource practices, while fewer efforts integrate these factors into a comprehensive understanding of inclusive work environments.

Although narrative, scoping, and integrative reviews have contributed valuable conceptual insights, there is a need for a systematic synthesis that consolidates empirical evidence on the determinants of inclusive work environments across contexts and disciplines (Nguyen et al., 2024). In response to this gap, the present study undertakes a systematic review of the literature on the determinants of inclusive work environments. The aim is to identify, categorize, and synthesize empirical findings related to behavioral, organizational, and contextual determinants of inclusion, as well as the outcomes associated with inclusive workplaces. By applying a systematic and transparent review approach, this study seeks to provide an evidence-based foundation to advance theory, inform organizational practice, and guide future research on inclusive work environments.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a systematic review design to synthesize empirical evidence on the determinants of an inclusive work environment in a transparent, replicable, and methodologically rigorous manner. A systematic review was considered appropriate because research on workplace inclusion is dispersed across disciplines, sectors, and methodological traditions, often examining isolated determinants without integration. Prior review studies have emphasized the need for structured evidence synthesis to consolidate conceptualizations, determinants, and outcomes of inclusion at work, thereby advancing cumulative knowledge and informing practice (Nguyen et al., 2024). Consistent with recent systematic and integrative reviews on inclusion and related organizational phenomena, this review followed a predefined protocol to minimize bias and enhance reliability (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024).

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies on inclusive work environments. Searches were conducted across major academic databases commonly used in management, organizational behavior, and social sciences research, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Keywords and Boolean combinations were designed to capture variations of workplace inclusion and its determinants, such as inclusive work environment, workplace inclusion, inclusive climate, inclusive leadership, organizational inclusion, and inclusion at work. To ensure relevance to contemporary organizational contexts, the search focused on studies published within the most recent decade, reflecting the period in which inclusion has emerged as a distinct construct in organizational research (Randel, 2025).

Clear eligibility criteria were applied to guide study inclusion and exclusion. Studies were included if they explicitly examined inclusion or inclusive work environments in organizational settings, addressed determinants or drivers of inclusion, and were published in peer-reviewed journals or as rigorously reviewed academic theses. Both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies, as well as systematic, scoping, or integrative reviews, were considered eligible where they contributed directly to understanding workplace inclusion. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on diversity without reference to inclusion, addressed inclusion outside work or organizational contexts, or lacked sufficient

methodological transparency. This approach is consistent with prior inclusion-focused reviews that emphasize conceptual clarity and empirical relevance (Rezai et al., 2023).

The study screening and selection process followed a structured, multi-stage approach. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were screened to assess relevance against the eligibility criteria. Full-text articles were then reviewed to confirm alignment with the review objectives. Studies that did not explicitly address workplace inclusion or its determinants were excluded at this stage. This stepwise screening process ensured that only studies directly relevant to inclusive work environments were retained, aligning with best practices in systematic review methodology (Altes et al., 2024). For data extraction and synthesis, a standardized extraction framework was developed to capture key study characteristics, including authorship, publication year, context, methodology, determinants of inclusion, and reported outcomes. Extracted data were synthesized using a thematic approach, allowing determinants to be grouped into broader categories such as leadership and management factors, organizational climate and practices, psychological and social mechanisms, and contextual or policy-related influences. This synthesis strategy enabled comparison across studies while preserving the diversity of theoretical perspectives and research designs present in the literature (Fujimoto et al., 2023).

Where applicable, quality appraisal was undertaken to assess the methodological robustness of included empirical studies. Attention was given to research design clarity, sample adequacy, analytical rigor, and transparency in reporting findings. Although quality appraisal was not used as a basis for excluding studies, it informed the interpretation of evidence strength during synthesis, as recommended in recent systematic reviews on inclusion and organizational practices (Nguyen et al., 2024). The review process and reporting in figure 1 was guided by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which provide a standardized framework for documenting identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies. Adherence to PRISMA enhances transparency and reproducibility and allows readers to assess the comprehensiveness of the review process (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024).

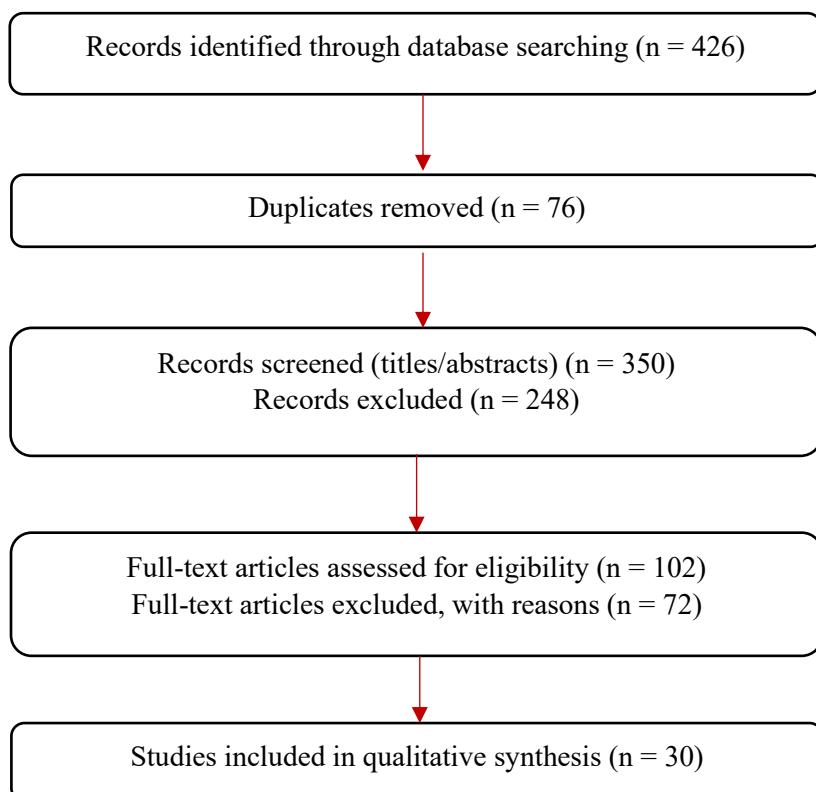


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

3. Results

3.1 Study Selection and Characteristics

The systematic search and screening process resulted in a final set of included studies that explicitly examined inclusion or inclusive work environments within organizational contexts. The selected studies represent a growing body of empirical and review-based research that has emerged as inclusion has become a distinct construct in organizational and management scholarship. The included literature spans both empirical investigations and evidence-based reviews, providing a comprehensive foundation for synthesizing determinants and outcomes of inclusive work environments. In terms of publication period, the majority of included studies were published between 2022 and 2025, reflecting the recent intensification of scholarly interest in workplace inclusion. This concentration of publications indicates that inclusion has gained prominence as organizations increasingly recognize the limitations of diversity-focused approaches that are not supported by inclusive practices. The geographical distribution of studies is broad, covering Europe, Asia, North America, and cross-national contexts. Empirical evidence has been reported from Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, China, Pakistan, the United States, and multinational organizational settings, demonstrating that inclusion is a globally relevant organizational phenomenon rather than one confined to a single cultural or institutional context (Borisov & Vinogradov, 2022; Maj, 2023).

With respect to sectors, populations, and study designs, the included studies span a wide range of organizational settings. Research has been conducted in private sector organizations, public administration, healthcare institutions, higher education, banking, information technology, and retail environments. Study populations include frontline employees, managers, healthcare professionals, educators, and human resource practitioners, allowing for a multi-perspective understanding of inclusion. Methodologically, the literature comprises quantitative studies using survey designs and structural equation modeling, qualitative studies based on interviews and thematic analysis, mixed-method approaches, and systematic, scoping, and integrative reviews. This methodological diversity strengthens the robustness of the evidence base while highlighting the multifaceted nature of inclusion research (Rezai et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Table 1 presents the Literature Review Matrix, summarizing the characteristics of the included studies in terms of authorship, publication year, country or sector, research methodology, determinants examined, and key findings. The matrix provides a structured overview of how inclusion has been conceptualized and empirically examined across contexts and serves as the analytical foundation for the thematic synthesis presented in the subsequent sections.

Table 1. Literature Review Matrix

No.	Author(s) & Year	Inclusive Work Environment	Leadership / Management	Organizational Climate	Psychological / Social Factors	HR / Policy Factors	Innovation / Performance Outcomes	Employee Well-Being / Engagement
1	Borisov & Vinogradov (2022)	✓		✓				✓
2	Rezai et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Santarpia et al. (2024)	✓	✓		✓			✓
4	Li et al. (2022)	✓		✓			✓	
5	Randel (2025)	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
6	Siyal (2023)		✓		✓			✓
7	Kuknor & Bhattacharya (2022)	✓	✓			✓		
8	Veldhuizen (2024)	✓	✓	✓		✓		
9	Ince (2023)	✓	✓				✓	✓
10	Haar & Brougham (2022)	✓	✓					✓
11	Igboanugo et al. (2022)	✓		✓		✓		
12	Eshete & Birbirssa (2024)	✓	✓			✓		
13	Zaccone & Pedrini (2025)	✓			✓	✓		
14	Noor et al. (2024)	✓		✓		✓		
15	Casper et al. (2025)		✓	✓		✓		✓
16	Yousaf et al. (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
17	Richards (2025)	✓		✓	✓			
18	Alang et al. (2022)	✓	✓		✓	✓		

19	Stewart (2023)	✓			✓			
20	Majercak et al. (2024)				✓	✓	✓	
21	Nguyen et al. (2024)	✓		✓				
22	McCandless et al. (2022)	✓					✓	
23	Table et al. (2022)	✓		✓	✓			
24	Altes et al. (2024)	✓	✓	✓			✓	
25	Fujimoto et al. (2023)	✓			✓	✓		✓
26	Samašonok et al. (2023)	✓		✓	✓	✓		
27	Maj (2023)	✓		✓				✓
28	Men et al. (2023)	✓		✓				✓
29	Okatta et al. (2024)	✓	✓				✓	✓
30	Procházková et al. (2024)	✓				✓		

3.2 Determinants of an Inclusive Work Environment

The synthesis of the included studies reveals that the determinants of an inclusive work environment can be grouped into behavioral, organizational, and contextual or structural categories. These determinants operate at multiple levels and often interact to shape employees' perceptions and experiences of inclusion at work. Behavioral determinants are most prominently associated with leadership and interpersonal relations. Inclusive leadership behaviors, such as openness, accessibility, fairness, and encouragement of employee voice, consistently emerge as critical drivers of inclusion. Leaders who actively involve employees in decision-making and acknowledge individual differences contribute to stronger perceptions of inclusion within teams and organizations (Siyal, 2023). Ethical leadership has similarly been shown to foster cultural inclusion by modeling fairness and respect, thereby influencing positive employee behaviors and attitudes (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Interpersonal trust and psychological safety further reinforce inclusive environments by enabling employees to express themselves without fear of exclusion or negative consequences (Richards, 2025).

Organizational determinants relate to formal structures, cultures, and practices that institutionalize inclusion. Studies emphasize the importance of inclusive organizational climates supported by coherent human resource management practices, including equitable recruitment, training, development, and performance management systems. Strategic human resource management has been identified as a key mechanism for embedding inclusion into organizational processes and aligning leadership intent with everyday practice (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024). Organizational communication and diversity-focused initiatives also contribute to inclusive climates by signaling organizational commitment to inclusion and reinforcing shared norms (Men et al., 2023). Contextual and structural determinants reflect the influence of sectoral, institutional, and societal conditions on workplace inclusion. Research conducted in public administration, healthcare, and education highlights how professional norms, regulatory environments, and societal expectations shape the ways inclusion is understood and enacted. In public sector contexts, inclusive leadership and supportive institutional frameworks have been shown to enhance participation

and voice among marginalized employee groups (Alang et al., 2022). Broader societal factors, such as social equity agendas and labor market structures, further condition organizational efforts to promote inclusion across different national settings (McCandless et al., 2022).

3.3 Outcomes Associated with an Inclusive Work Environment

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that inclusive work environments are associated with a range of positive outcomes at the employee, organizational, and societal levels. At the employee level, inclusion is strongly linked to higher work engagement, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being. Employees who perceive their workplaces as inclusive report stronger emotional attachment to their organizations and greater motivation to contribute to their roles (Borisov & Vinogradov, 2022). Empirical studies further show that inclusive work environments enhance job satisfaction by ensuring that employees feel respected and valued regardless of background (Maj, 2023). Psychological safety and belongingness have also been associated with reduced stress and more positive work-related attitudes (Santarpia et al., 2024).

At the organizational level, inclusive work environments contribute to improved performance-related outcomes. Inclusive climates have been linked to enhanced innovation through better knowledge sharing and collaboration among diverse employees (Li et al., 2022). Evidence also suggests that inclusion supports employee retention by strengthening commitment and reducing turnover intentions, particularly among younger and minority employees (Procházková et al., 2024). Organizations that prioritize inclusion are therefore better positioned to leverage workforce diversity for sustainable performance. Finally, inclusion is associated with broader social and equity-related outcomes. Studies conducted in healthcare and public sector settings demonstrate that inclusive environments support equitable service delivery and improved quality of care by fostering collaboration and mutual respect among professionals (Yousaf et al., 2022). At a societal level, workplace inclusion contributes to social equity by reducing marginalization and enabling fair access to employment opportunities and organizational resources (Fujimoto et al., 2023).

4. Discussion

4.1 Interplay of Behavioral, Organizational, and Contextual Determinants

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that inclusive work environments are shaped by a multilevel and interdependent configuration of determinants rather than by isolated factors. Behavioral determinants, particularly leadership behaviors and interpersonal relations, interact dynamically with organizational systems and broader contextual conditions to influence employees' experiences of inclusion. Inclusive leadership behaviors function as proximal signals that translate organizational values into daily practices, thereby shaping how inclusion is enacted at the team and individual levels. Evidence indicates that leaders who demonstrate openness, fairness, and respect facilitate psychological safety and trust, which are essential interpersonal mechanisms for inclusion (Siyal, 2023). However, leadership behaviors alone are insufficient to sustain inclusion over time. Organizational determinants such as inclusive climates, human resource management practices, and internal communication systems provide

the structural reinforcement necessary for leadership intentions to materialize consistently across the organization. Studies show that inclusive climates emerge when organizational policies and practices align with inclusive leadership, creating coherence between what leaders promote and what employees experience (Men et al., 2023).

Strategic human resource management further strengthens this alignment by embedding inclusion into recruitment, development, and performance management systems, ensuring that inclusive behaviors are supported institutionally rather than remaining discretionary (Eshete & Birbirss, 2024). Contextual and structural determinants add an additional layer of complexity to this interplay. Sectoral norms, institutional frameworks, and societal expectations shape the boundaries within which behavioral and organizational determinants operate. Research conducted in public administration and healthcare illustrates that inclusion is influenced by professional hierarchies, regulatory environments, and social equity agendas, which can either enable or constrain organizational efforts to foster inclusion (Alang et al., 2022). At the societal level, labor market structures and social inclusion norms further condition how inclusion is interpreted and prioritized within organizations (McCandless et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that inclusive work environments emerge from the joint influence of behavioral, organizational, and contextual determinants operating across multiple levels.

4.2 Policy, Practical, and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review carry important practical implications for organizational leaders and human resource professionals. Leaders play a critical role in shaping inclusive environments through everyday behaviors that signal respect, openness, and fairness. Developing inclusive leadership capabilities can therefore enhance employee engagement and well-being by fostering psychological safety and trust (Haar & Brougham, 2022). For human resource professionals, the evidence underscores the importance of designing and implementing HR practices that institutionalize inclusion, such as equitable access to development opportunities, transparent performance evaluation systems, and diversity-focused training initiatives (Zaccone & Pedrini, 2025). From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the relevance of inclusion for diversity and equity governance at organizational and societal levels. Organizational policies that support inclusion contribute to fair treatment and participation, particularly for marginalized groups, and can enhance retention and performance outcomes (Casper et al., 2025).

In public sector and regulated environments, inclusion policies also align with broader social equity objectives by promoting participation, voice, and fairness in public institutions (McCandless et al., 2022). Policymakers can therefore leverage inclusion-focused frameworks to complement diversity initiatives and ensure that inclusion is translated into meaningful workplace experiences. The review also contributes to theoretical advancement in inclusion and organizational behavior research. By synthesizing evidence across behavioral, organizational, and contextual domains, the findings support conceptualizations of inclusion as a multilevel construct embedded in social and institutional systems. This perspective aligns with emerging models that view inclusion as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between individual perceptions, organizational practices, and contextual conditions (Nguyen et al., 2024). The review thus advances theory by clarifying how different determinants jointly influence inclusive work environments rather than operating independently.

4.3 Comparison with Existing Reviews, Limitations, and Future Research

Compared with prior narrative, scoping, and integrative reviews, this systematic review offers a more structured and determinant-focused synthesis of the literature on inclusive work environments. While previous reviews have provided valuable conceptual frameworks and research agendas, they often emphasize definitional debates or sector-specific perspectives (Randel, 2025). In contrast, the present review consolidates empirical evidence across sectors and methodologies to identify recurring determinant categories and associated outcomes, thereby strengthening the cumulative understanding of inclusion at work. Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review is constrained by the scope and quality of the included studies, which vary in methodological rigor and contextual focus.

Many empirical studies rely on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference. Second, although the review captures a range of sectors and regions, research remains unevenly distributed, with greater representation from certain geographical contexts. Conceptually, differences in how inclusion is defined and measured across studies may also affect comparability. These limitations point to important directions for future research. Longitudinal and multi-level studies are needed to examine how inclusive work environments develop and change over time. Future research should also explore underrepresented contexts and sectors to enhance the generalizability of findings. Additionally, greater attention to the interaction between inclusion determinants and outcomes could advance understanding of the mechanisms through which inclusion influences organizational performance and social equity (Fujimoto et al., 2023). By addressing these gaps, future studies can build on the evidence synthesized in this review to further advance theory and practice related to inclusive work environments.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review set out to synthesize empirical evidence on the determinants of an inclusive work environment and to clarify how inclusion is shaped across behavioral, organizational, and contextual levels. The findings demonstrate that inclusion is not the result of a single practice or policy, but rather emerges from the interaction of leadership behaviors, organizational systems, and broader institutional and societal conditions. Inclusive work environments are therefore best understood as dynamic and multi-level phenomena that require sustained commitment rather than isolated interventions. At the behavioral level, the review highlights the central role of leaders and interpersonal relationships in shaping employees' day-to-day experiences of inclusion. Leaders act as key agents who translate organizational values into practice, influencing whether employees feel respected, heard, and able to contribute authentically. However, leadership alone is insufficient to sustain inclusion without organizational structures that reinforce inclusive behaviors and expectations. Formal human resource practices, inclusive climates, and supportive communication systems provide the institutional foundation necessary for inclusion to be consistently experienced across the organization.

The review further shows that contextual and sectoral factors condition how inclusion is interpreted and implemented in different organizational settings. Variations across sectors such as healthcare, education, public administration, and private organizations underscore the importance of aligning inclusion

initiatives with institutional norms, professional cultures, and societal expectations. These contextual influences reinforce the need for flexible and context-sensitive approaches to building inclusive work environments. Overall, this systematic review contributes to a clearer and more integrated understanding of inclusive work environments by consolidating fragmented evidence into a coherent framework of determinants and outcomes. By demonstrating the value of inclusion for employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, and broader social equity, the findings underscore the importance of embedding inclusion as a core organizational principle. Future efforts to promote inclusive work environments will benefit from adopting holistic strategies that align leadership, organizational systems, and contextual conditions to create workplaces in which all employees can participate fully and equitably.

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