

# Inclusive Leadership, Safety Climate and Safety Behaviour: A Proposed Framework

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to propose a framework for understanding inclusive leadership as an antecedent of the safety climate – safety behaviour relationship. Though the relationship between safety climate and safety behaviour is well-established in the safety management literature, studies on the antecedents of safety climate are few. More so, while a few studies have examined leadership as an antecedent of safety climate, none has examined inclusive leadership in relation to safety climate and by extension, safety behaviour. Of note also is that no study has examined the direct relationship between inclusive leadership and safety behaviour. Hence, this paper discusses inclusive leadership as an antecedent of the safety climate-safety behaviour relationship. A conceptual model backed by the Social Exchange Theory is thus proposed for future empirical endeavours and for expanding the leadership and safety management literature.

**Keywords:** Inclusive leadership, Safety climate, Safety behaviour

## 1. Introduction

Safety climate is acclaimed to be an overarching determinant factor of safety behaviours across work-settings in diverse socio-demographic milieu. Interestingly, extensive empirical underpinnings grounded on theory, practice and methodology attest to a consensus that the safety climate - safety behaviours relationship has been positive (Neal & Griffin, 2006; Zhou, Fang, & Wang, 2008; Lu & Tsai, 2010; Fugas, Silva, & Melia, 2012; Tholén, Pousette, & Törner, 2013; Hon, Chan, & Yam, 2014; Liu, Huang, Huang, Wang, Xiao, & Chen, 2015). However, in examining the components of safety behaviours, researchers chronically focused on safety compliance and safety participation as its core components. Meanwhile, risky behaviour, which is noted to be a critical component of safety behaviours (Mearns, Whitaker, & Flin,

2001; Martinez-Corcoles, Gracia, Tomas, & Peiro, 2011) has been empirically overlooked overtime. While the antecedents of safety behaviours improve safety compliance and safety participation indicators, the same antecedents lead to a reduction in risk-taking behaviours and/or displaying unsafe behaviours. Notwithstanding the empirically established ability of safety climate in explaining safety behaviours, empiricists in the field of safety management are encouraged to direct their empirical lens to examining factors that strengthen safety climate. For example, upon reviewing 30 years of empirical efforts and submission related to safety climate, Zohar (2010) posited that it will be worthwhile to theoretically expand the understanding of this relationship via antecedents, mediators and moderators. Clarke (2010) also emphasizes the need for empirical efforts specifically looking at safety climate, its organizational antecedents and/or individual outcomes.

In the management and organisational studies literature, leadership is identified as one of the most critical socio-psychological factors that determine organizational outcomes (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Xu, Wang, Yu, & Chen, 2014; Hartnell, Kinicki, Lambert, Fuagte, & Doyle Corner, 2016), and more specifically safety-related organizational outcomes (Kapp, 2012; Lievens & Vlerick, 2014). However, quite a few studies have examined leadership as an antecedent of safety climate (e.g., Zohar, Huang, Lee, & Robertson, 2014; McFadden, Stock, & Gowen III, 2015). More so, the studies on leadership and safety climate, and by extension safety behaviours greatly looked at general, constructive and attendant forms of leadership behaviours (Kelloway, Mullen, & Francis, 2006; Martinez-Corcoles et al., 2011). Unfortunately, research on inclusive leadership as an antecedent of safety climate, and in relation to safety behaviours is unavailable to the best of our knowledge. Hence, a three-fold approach is used to achieve the objective of this paper. First, we intend to discuss inclusive leadership as an antecedent of safety climate with a view to expanding the safety management literature. Secondly, the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) is used as an underpinning theory to explain the relationship, and thirdly, a conceptual framework of inclusive leadership as an antecedent of safety climate and resultant safety behaviours is proposed to future empirical endeavours.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Inclusive Leadership**

Numerous academic disciplines are interested in leadership studies as it is a critical underlying factor in achieving organizational goals and objectives. However, findings from uncountable number of leadership-based research suggest overt emphasis on leader behaviours much more than the effects of leader behaviours on their subordinates (Hollander, Park, Boyd, Elman, & Ignani, 2008). This supports the position of Burns (1978) who noted that leadership behaviours vis-à-vis the attendant characteristics should not be separated from the needs and goals of their follows. It is therefore important to take a close look at a leadership style that is more focused on employee needs and in developing future leaders. Also, in the ever-changing business environment, calls for the type of leadership that can adjust, adapt, be flexible and see things from all-inclusive perspectives have become critical. This is so because organizations' key success factors are not dependent on their practices and procedures, but by leaders who display characteristics of inclusion (Janakiraman, 2011).

In development theory and attendant studies, the concept of inclusiveness is used to espouse the need to actively involve the poor and less-privileged in developmental decision-making, implementation and execution processes (Wuffli, 2016). Specifically, inclusive leadership is

used to depict leaders who encourage and value contributions from others, thereby shaping the belief system of their subordinates that they are genuinely appreciated (Nembhard & Edmundson, 2006). Inclusive leadership ascribes so much emphasis on “doing things with people, and not to people” (Hollander et al., 2008). They also encourage dynamism across divergent socio-demographic milieu Wuflli (2016) in possible preparation for eventualities in global business dynamism and/or policy directional shifts to avoid failures emanating from unpreparedness.

In essence, Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon & Ziv (2010) succinctly summarized inclusive leadership as a leadership style where leaders exhibit openness, accessibility and availability in the course of interacting with their followers. Suffice to say that in view of the characteristics of the inclusive leadership style, subordinates are usually encouraged to speak up about situations in the work place (Bowers, Robertson, & Parchman, 2012), knowing that their leaders are open to their suggestions, are accessible to discuss issues, and are readily available to work with them in achieving organizational goals and objectives. Interestingly, it is critical to note that some studies have examined how inclusive leadership can exert organizational outcomes. Unfortunately, these studies were done in educational (Ryan, 2006; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; Rayner, 2009; Fierke, Lui, Lepp, & Baldwin, 2014) and religious (Echols, 2009) settings. A few related studies were also done to understand change (Bowers et al., 2012), turnover (Nishii & Mayer, 2009) and work engagement (Choi, Tran, & Park, 2015). Though no study has been done in relation to safety management, the study by Carmeli et al. (2010) caught our attention in that they examined the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee involvement in creative tasks with psychological safety as a mediator. This is a far cry from the focus of this paper especially that it is completely off the safety management domain.

Generally, leaders create climate (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Organizational climates that shape employee attitudes and behaviours are as a result of leadership (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Furthermore, employee climate perceptions (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989; Hult, Hurley, Guinipero, & Nichols, 2000) and specifically employee safety climate perceptions (Barling, Loughlin and Kelloway, 2002) are shaped by leader behaviours. Interestingly, in some studies targeted towards explaining diverse organizational outcomes, leadership was examined and found to be an antecedent of safety climate. For example, continuous quality improvement (McFadden et al., 2015), emotional labour and intention (Liang, Tang, Wang, Lin, & Yu, 2016), work climate (Dahl & Olsen, 2013), intrinsic motivation and trust (Conchie, 2013) and risk perception (Birkeland-Nielsen, Eid, Mearns, & Larsson, 2013). To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined inclusive leadership within the core context of safety climate with safety behaviours as endpoint. Our submissions in relation to this paper is predicated upon the fact that growing leadership studies indicate a plausible relationship between the variables in this proposed framework. We therefore opine that the scarcity and/or virtual unavailability of studies on inclusive leadership as an antecedent of safety climate further strengthens the conceptual position of this paper. This leads us to our first research hypothesis:

**H1: There is a positive relationship between inclusive leadership and safety climate.**

## **2.2 Safety Climate and Safety Behaviours**

Safety climate describes employees’ perception about safety in their organization, and how the perceptions they form guide their safety-related behaviours (Zohar, 1980; Shannon and

Norman, 2009). It has been posited that safety climate is fundamental to improving workplace proactive safety indicators (Arezes & Miguel, 2008; Bosak, Coetsee, & Cullinane, 2013; Barbaranelli, Petitta, & Probst, 2015), as it represents employees perceptions of safety-related policies, procedures and practices prevalent in workplaces (Neal & Griffin, 2006). Therefore, positive safety climate is a *sine-qua-non* for employees of organizations to carry out their job functions and roles safely (Panuwatwanich, Al-Haadir & Stewart, 2016). We are however of the view that it is imperative for organizations to have functional and result-oriented policies, practices and procedures that are capable of positively skewing workers safety-related behaviours.

In examining safety behaviours, two distinct components whose nomenclature are based on the job performance structure by Borman and Motowidlo (1993) are widely considered. They are, safety compliance and safety participation (Griffin & Neal, 2000; Neal & Griffin, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008; Morrow, McGonagle, Dove-Steinkamp, Walker, Marmet, & Barnes-Farrell, 2010; Tholén et al., 2013; Newaz, Davis, Jefferies, & Pillay, 2016). While safety compliance entails adhering to standard work procedures, and the use of personal protective equipment, safety participation has to do with voluntarily participating in safety-related activities like helping co-workers to work safely (Neal & Griffin, 2006). Safety compliance and safety participation have been greatly researched as core components of safety behaviours. However, we propose the inclusion of risky behaviour as another component of safety behaviours. Though this component has been earlier proposed (Mearns et al., 2001), it has not gained so much empirical prominence within the safety management literature. Also, our position on this proposition is predicated upon Rotundo and Sackett's (2002) threefold job performance structure, which we presume can fit into safety behaviours study. Risky behaviours are capable of causing adverse consequences in the workplace (Martínez-Córcoles, Gracia, Tomás, Peiró, & Schöbel, 2013). However, the submission on latent errors by Ramanujam and Goodman (2003) clarifies our understanding that risky behaviour is a nonconformity with standard organizational practices, processes and beliefs that may not necessarily cause instantaneous consequences. Succinctly put, based on the submissions of previous studies (Zhou et al., 2008; Martínez-Córcoles et al., 2011; Tholén et al., 2013), the relationships between safety climate and safety behaviours have been positive, we therefore propose;

**H2: There is a positive relationship between safety climate and safety behaviours in that positive safety climate will exert high safety compliance and safety participation, and reduced risky behaviour.**

### **2.3 Inclusive Leadership, Safety Climate and Safety Behaviour**

Further relying on the submissions of Zohar (2010) and Clarke (2010), inclusive leadership has been identified as an antecedent of safety climate in the present study. Leadership is a critical socio-psychological organizational factor capable of determining and/or explaining safety outcomes (Flin & Yule, 2004). For emphasis, we concur with prevalent opinions that leadership is the single most critical factor affecting organizational safety performance. It is also noted that leadership characteristics that support safety is capable of shaping subordinates perception of risk and their eventual safety-related behaviours (Conchie, Taylor, & Donald, 2012; Birkeland-Nielsen et al., 2013).

Interestingly, a search of the leadership and safety management literature points to a good number of studies that have been done across diverse work settings and socio-demographic

milieus on the positive relationship between leadership and safety behaviours (e.g., Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999; Zohar, 2000; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Mullen & Kelloway, 2009; Inness, Turner, Barling, & Stride, 2010; Kapp, 2012; Conchie, 2013; Dahl & Olsen, 2013; Wu, Fang, & Li, 2015; Probst & Jiang, 2016; Birkeland-Nielsen, Skogstad, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2016). However, the number of studies that examined leadership as an antecedent of safety climate, and in relation to safety behaviours are quite countable, which is an indication of empirical paucity in this regard (Barling et al., 2002; Clarke & Ward, 2006; Kelloway, Turner, Barling, & Loughlin, 2006; Martinez-Corcoles et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012; Clarke, 2013). Though the relationship in their studies were found to be positive, none of the studies so cited examined this link with specific focus on inclusive leadership. Based on plausibility, we therefore propose:

**H3: Inclusive leadership will mediate the relationship between safety climate and safety behaviours.**

#### 2.4 Theoretical Support

The provisions of the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) further strengthens our argument on the proposed framework. The theory notes that people voluntarily take actions in view of the fact that they are “motivated by the return they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others” (p. 91). Guided by the rules of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), we posit that one party is at the giving end while the other is at the receiving end. Hence, as one party does a favour that is valued, the party at the receiving end should reciprocate with a favour of coordinate value and *vice versa*. Consequently, the relationship between leaders and employees may metamorphose into one of reciprocity (Strom, Sears, & Kelly, 2014).

When subordinates perceive that their leaders are genuinely interested in their well-being, they are likely to reciprocate by improving on their job/task performance (Walumbwa, Mayer, Wang, Wang, & Workman, 2011). Hence, the relationship between leadership, safety climate and safety behaviours can be seen as a social interaction process where reciprocity is traditional. Specifically, the merits of the inclusive leadership style is characteristic of being able to provide socio-psychological support to subordinates. When subordinates' perception are positively shaped in this regard, it become morally obligatory on them to show high commitment to achieving set organizational goals and objectives. Within the gamut of this paper, we posit that when employees perceive that their leaders are open, are available, and are accessible, their safety climate perceptions are shaped in to complying with safety rules and procedures, participating in safety-related activities and a possible reduction in engaging in risky behaviours.

#### 2.5 The Proposed Framework

The framework of this study has proposed inclusive leadership as independent variable, safety climate as a mediating variable and safety behaviours as dependent variable.

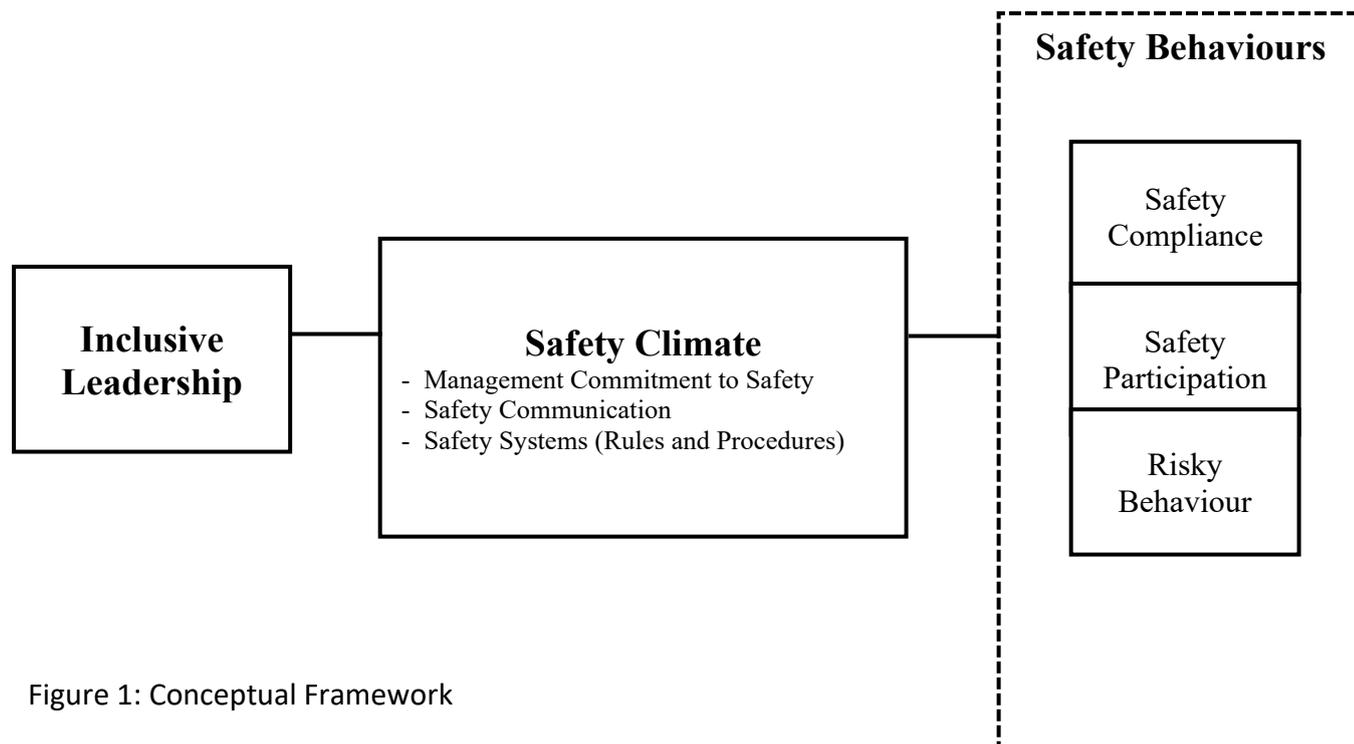


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### 3.0 Conclusion and Future Direction

Available empirical and theoretical underpinnings highlight the import of leadership in explaining and/or determining safety behaviours in organizations. However, only a few studies have been done on how this relationship is explained via safety climate. More so, the studies focused primarily on characteristics related to general transformational and transactional leadership styles. We have therefore based our proposition on the empirical neglect of the inclusive leadership style as an antecedent of safety climate and by extension safety behaviours. To the best of our knowledge no proposition of this nature has been done in the leadership and safety management literature, and more so that the proposed framework is underpinned with by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). As the capability of the inclusive leadership style in determining safety climate has been noted, it is our hope that we are able to trigger empirical investigations to validate our arguments and their applicability to work contexts, and/or social/demographic characteristics that suit researchers interest.

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