



Rethinking Inclusive Leadership: A Scoping Review of Barriers and Challenges

Krista Nuutinen, EURAM 2026, Navigating High Waters - Managing in an age of disruption, 16-19 June, Kristiansand, Norway

SIG 5 T05_04 – Responsible DEI when facing disruption: Migration, intersectionality, and queer perspectives

Exclusion, embeddedness, and barriers to inclusion in organizations



Työsuojelurahasto
Arbetskyddsfonden
The Finnish Work Environment Fund





Rethinking Inclusive Leadership through Scoping Review – work in progress

- 01** Theoretical gap – Why this matter?

- 02** Complexity of Inclusive Leadership

- 03** Scoping review for mapping barriers and challenges

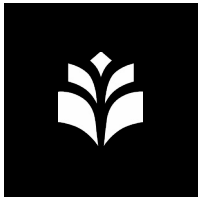
- 04** Refining (preliminarily) the theory of inclusive leadership

- 05** Discussion and conclusions

Inclusive Leadership

= A set of inclusive leadership practices and organizational arrangements aiming to create an inclusive workplace

Multi-level understanding of inclusion



01 Why to rethink inclusive leadership now?

- Inclusive leadership is widely promoted as a *best practice*
- Times of disruption and polarization expose its limits and blind spots
- Need for responsible, reflexive DEI scholarship and practice



01 What Is Missing in Inclusive Leadership Theory?

- Research strongly emphasizes positive outcomes of inclusive leadership practices
 - E.g. IL has positive effects on team performance, employee engagement and organizational outcomes (Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2018)
- IL do not always deliver the intended outcomes. (Ferdman & Deane, 2013; Nishii et al., 2018; Romani et al., 2019; Xiaotao et al., 2018)
- Challenges, failures, barriers, and adverse effects are underexplored
- Critical insights are fragmented across disciplines and contexts
- Conclusion?: Inclusive leadership appears linear, universal, and inherently good



01 Research Question

Core Questions

- What are the unintended outcomes of inclusive leadership?
- What kind of factors and mechanisms can be identified?
- (How do these barriers or paradoxes challenge the responsibility and inclusivity of DEI practices?)

Theoretical Focus

- Why a multi-level perspective is required?
- The phenomenon is more complex than the prevailing theory suggests.



02 Inclusive leadership as a complex and context-related phenomenon

1. Inclusive leadership theory
 - Uniqueness & belongingness
 - Psychological safety, voice, inclusion climate
2. Multi-level perspectives
 - Individual, team, organizational, societal
 - Leadership is not isolated from structures and norms

These strands exist in the literature, but they are rarely brought together into a coherent theoretical account.



02 Multi-level framework of inclusion (Ferdman 2013)

Individual experience	Feeling safe, trusted, engaged and authentic in the workplace, both as individual and as a member of an identity group.
Interpersonal behaviour	Respectful interactions, curiosity and collaboration.
Group level	Practices and norms that ensure voice, respect, collaboration and conflict resolution.
Leadership	Practices that emphasize transparency, dialogue and alignment between organizational goals and inclusion.
Organization	Policies and structures that create an inclusion climate. Inclusion is also assessed.
Society	Broader cultural and policy context that enables individuals' and groups' identities and participation.



03 Scoping Review as a Theoretical Intervention

- Fragmented evidence → integration
- JBI + PRISMA-ScR
- Databases: Scopus, WoS, PubMed
- Time frame: 2010–2026
- Focus: IL + barriers / adverse outcomes

Analysis

- Deductive coding (multi-level framework)
- Inductive identification of cross-cutting mechanisms



Scoping review method – according to PRISMA-ScR guidelines

STEP1: Defining the research questions

STEP2: Developing and refining comprehensive search strategy (with librarian support)

STEP 3: Applying inclusion criteria to select peer-reviewed studies addressing barriers or adverse outcomes of inclusive leadership at societal, organizational, team and individual levels

STEP 4: Charting data using Atlas.ti to extract bibliographic details, theoretical frameworks, methodology, context, identified barriers, and research gaps;

STEP 5: Synthesizing findings descriptively and conceptually using multi-level framework.



Example of a pilot search result, Web of Science (Total 641 results)





04 Preliminary Theoretical Signals

What the scoping review makes visible – so far (work in progress)

- Paradoxical dynamics (Ferdman 2017)
 - Belonging vs. uniqueness
 - Safety vs. change
- Non-linear effects – e.g. TMGT (Xiaotao et al. 2018)
 - Moderate inclusion may outperform very high inclusion
- Virtue traps
 - Benevolent discrimination (Romani et al. 2019)
 - Tokenism masked as inclusion (Adesina et al. 2025)



05 Discussion and conclusions

- By mapping these barriers and challenges, the review aims to inform both theory development and practical strategies on how to advance responsible DEI practices.
- “Failures of inclusive leadership”? A multi-level perspective highlights how structural constraints, organizational cultures, and societal dynamics shape what leaders can do and how their actions are interpreted.



05 Implications for responsible DEI

- How to practice responsibly
 - Diagnose paradoxes instead of denying them
 - Use multi-level analysis
 - Combine reflexivity with responsibility




UNIVERSITY OF
EASTERN FINLAND

Thank you!


krisnuu@student.uef.fi

uef.fi

Funded by



Työsuojelurahasto
Arbetskyddsfonden
The Finnish Work Environment Fund



Suomalainen
Konkordia-liitto

