

# Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement in Hybrid Asian IT Workplaces: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Cultural Moderation

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## ABSTRACT

The accelerated adoption of hybrid work models has significantly redefined leadership dynamics within contemporary organizations, particularly in Asia's rapidly evolving information technology (IT) sector. This study investigates the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in hybrid work environments across five Asian countries. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study combines qualitative data from 50 semi-structured interviews with team leaders and employees, and quantitative data gathered using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). This dual approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis of key inclusive leadership behaviors—namely, openness, accessibility, and respect for diversity—and their relationship to engagement outcomes such as trust, motivation, and psychological safety. Thematic analysis reveals four core themes that illuminate how inclusive leadership manifests in distributed teams. Concurrently, quantitative findings demonstrate a strong, statistically significant correlation between perceived inclusive leadership and employee engagement ( $r = .84, p < .01$ ). By triangulating qualitative insights with empirical survey data, the study provides robust evidence that inclusive leadership functions as a critical enabler of employee engagement in digitally mediated and culturally diverse workplace contexts. The findings offer actionable strategies for organizational leaders and human resource practitioners seeking to sustain collaboration, cohesion, and performance in hybrid work settings. Moreover, the study contributes to the broader theoretical discourse on leadership by contextualizing inclusive leadership within the dynamics of hybrid work and cross-cultural management.

## INTRODUCTION

The global shift towards hybrid work models—where employees alternate between remote and on-site work—has significantly transformed organizational dynamics, particularly within Asia's rapidly evolving information technology (IT) sector. This transformation, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has prompted organizations to reevaluate traditional leadership approaches to effectively manage distributed teams and maintain employee engagement (Wang et al., 2022).

Hybrid work arrangements offer flexibility and autonomy, yet they also introduce challenges related to communication, collaboration, and inclusivity. Leaders are now tasked with fostering a sense of belonging and engagement among employees who may seldom interact in person. In this context, inclusive leadership—characterized by openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse perspectives—has emerged as a critical factor in promoting psychological safety and employee engagement (Edmondson, 2019).

Despite the recognized importance of inclusive leadership, there is a paucity of empirical research examining its impact within hybrid work environments, especially in the Asian IT industry. Cultural nuances and varying organizational practices across Asian countries necessitate a contextual understanding of how inclusive leadership behaviors influence employee engagement in hybrid settings.

As organizations increasingly rely on digital tools to manage dispersed teams, leadership effectiveness can no longer be evaluated solely through traditional metrics such as output or compliance. Instead, leaders must now foster engagement through intentional relationship-building, inclusive communication practices, and

adaptability across physical and virtual boundaries. Inclusive leadership, in this regard, becomes more than a management style—it serves as a strategic capability that enables organizations to respond to uncertainty, bridge cultural divides, and humanize digital workspaces (Zhu et al., 2022; Edmondson, 2019). Given that hybrid work is not merely a temporary response to the pandemic but a long-term structural shift, understanding how leadership behaviors influence employee engagement in these environments is both timely and essential.

## Research Objective and Question

This study aims to explore the role of inclusive leadership in shaping employee engagement within hybrid IT workplaces in Asia. The central research question guiding this inquiry is:

**How do inclusive leadership behaviors influence employee engagement in hybrid IT work environments across Asia?**

## Significance of the Study

By investigating this question, the study seeks to contribute to the theoretical understanding of inclusive leadership in hybrid work contexts and provide practical insights for leaders in the Asian IT sector. The findings are expected to inform leadership development programs and organizational policies aimed at enhancing employee engagement and performance in increasingly flexible and diverse work environments.

## Hypotheses

Drawing on insights from the literature on inclusive leadership and employee engagement, the study proposes the following hypotheses to guide the investigation:

**H1:** Inclusive leadership behaviors—such as openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse perspectives—positively influence employee engagement in hybrid work environments.

**H2:** Employees who perceive their leaders as inclusive demonstrate higher levels of trust, motivation, and engagement in hybrid work settings.

**H3:** Team leaders who employ inclusive leadership strategies are more effective in sustaining communication, team cohesion, and engagement among both remote and on-site employees.

**H4:** Cultural and organizational contexts within Asian IT firms moderate how inclusive leadership is enacted and how it affects employee engagement outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Inclusive Leadership: Conceptual Foundations

Inclusive leadership is characterized by behaviors that promote openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse perspectives, fostering an environment where all team members feel valued and empowered to contribute (Nemhard & Edmondson, 2006). This leadership style emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, enabling employees to express ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences, thereby enhancing engagement and performance (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Further research indicates that inclusive leadership enhances psychological safety and psychological engagement, which in turn increases employees' helping behaviors and overall well-being (Zhu et al., 2022). Inclusive leaders listen to the feelings and ideas of employees and provide support, conveying the message that the leader has the best interest of their members in mind, thus fostering trust and team cohesion (BMC Psychology, 2024).

### Employee Engagement in Hybrid Work Environments

The shift to hybrid work models, combining remote and in-office work, has redefined employee engagement dynamics. While hybrid work offers flexibility, it also presents challenges in maintaining consistent engagement levels. A survey by Zoom indicated that 60% of leaders in the Asia-Pacific region observed a

decline in employee engagement attributed to hybrid work arrangements (Zoom, 2024). This underscores the need for leadership approaches that can effectively sustain engagement in hybrid settings.

Moreover, organizations are exploring strategies to drive successful employee engagement in a hybrid world, emphasizing the role of leadership in empowering their teams (HRM Asia, 2023). Studies have shown that inclusive leadership can positively influence employee engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and recognition, which is particularly crucial in hybrid work contexts where physical interactions are limited (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024).

### **The Interplay Between Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement**

Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. Inclusive leaders who actively seek input and demonstrate openness contribute to higher levels of employee engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and recognition (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). In hybrid work contexts, where physical interactions are limited, inclusive leadership becomes even more critical in bridging communication gaps and maintaining team cohesion (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024).

A study by Zhu et al. (2022) found that inclusive leadership enhances psychological safety and psychological engagement, which in turn increases employees' helping behaviors and overall well-being. Furthermore, inclusive leadership listens to the feelings and ideas of employees and provides support, conveying the message that the leader has the best interest of their members in mind, thus fostering trust and team cohesion (BMC Psychology, 2024).

### **Inclusive Leadership in the Asian IT Sector**

The Asian IT industry presents unique cultural and organizational contexts that influence leadership effectiveness. A study focusing on Indian IT companies found that inclusive leadership significantly impacts employees' innovative behavior, suggesting that such leadership styles are conducive to fostering engagement and innovation in the sector (Yadav, 2024). However, there remains a scarcity of research exploring inclusive leadership's role in hybrid work environments within the Asian IT context, highlighting a gap this study aims to address.

Moreover, the evolving hybrid workplace in Asia necessitates a deeper understanding of how inclusive leadership can be effectively implemented to enhance employee engagement and performance (Diversity Global, 2024). Organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of inclusive leadership in navigating the complexities of hybrid work models and fostering a culture of inclusivity and engagement.

### **Digital Leadership in Hybrid Workplaces**

The evolution of hybrid work arrangements has highlighted the urgent need for digital leadership capabilities that go beyond mere technical proficiency. Digital leadership is broadly defined as a leader's ability to strategically use digital technologies to enable collaboration, inspire remote teams, and foster innovation in virtual and distributed work environments (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2014). In hybrid environments, such leadership requires integrating digital fluency, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity to maintain employee engagement and organizational alignment across physical and virtual workspaces.

Recent studies confirm that digital leadership enhances an organization's adaptability and resilience, particularly during times of uncertainty and disruption (Turrell & Gil-Or, 2020). Leaders must establish inclusive communication norms that bridge spatial and cultural divides—ensuring equitable access to information, actively soliciting diverse input, and valuing employee contributions regardless of location or time zone. These practices reflect the essential dimensions of inclusive leadership, demonstrating how digital transformation requires not only a technological infrastructure but also human-centered leadership strategies (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

The intersection of digital leadership and inclusive leadership suggests that success in navigating hybrid work environments depends not only on digital tools, but also on the leader's ability to foster psychological safety,

trust, and shared purpose. Therefore, digital leadership should be viewed not only as a technical skill set, but as a key enabler of inclusive and sustainable engagement in the context of evolving organizational forms.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study is grounded in established literature that links inclusive leadership to employee engagement outcomes, particularly within the context of hybrid work environments. Inclusive leadership—defined by behaviors such as openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse viewpoints—is posited to enhance employee engagement by fostering critical psychological conditions, including trust, motivation, and effective communication. This framework further incorporates the cultural and organizational context of Asian IT firms as a moderating variable, recognizing that the enactment and perceived effectiveness of leadership behaviors may vary across different socio-cultural and institutional landscapes.

This model provides the analytical foundation for the research by visually articulating the hypothesized relationships between key constructs. It also aligns with the study's qualitative approach by guiding the exploration of how inclusive leadership is experienced and operationalized in hybrid work settings across diverse organizational environments in Asia.

This study builds on a conceptual framework informed by established scholarship that links inclusive leadership to employee engagement, particularly in the context of digital and hybrid work environments. Inclusive leadership, as defined by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006), encompasses leadership behaviors that promote openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse perspectives. These behaviors foster psychological safety—a baseline condition that encourages employees to express their opinions, take personal risks, and remain engaged in team processes.

In hybrid work environments, often characterized by physical dispersion, asynchronous communication, and cultural diversity, these leadership practices are vital to maintaining trust, motivation, and collaboration. The independent variable, inclusive leadership, is conceptualized through three core dimensions: openness, which refers to leaders actively inviting and valuing input from all team members; accessibility, which denotes a leader's constant presence and responsiveness across digital channels; and respect for diversity, defined as recognizing and incorporating different cultural, experiential, and cognitive perspectives into decision-making processes (Carmeli et al., 2010). These behaviors are hypothesized to directly enhance relationship dynamics and overall team climates, which are critical for maintaining employee cohesion and morale in hybrid environments.

The dependent variable, employee engagement, is treated as a multidimensional concept encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in one's work (Sax, 2006). Within hybrid teams, engagement is expressed through proactive participation, willingness to contribute ideas, and sustained commitment to team goals despite limited face-to-face interaction. Empirical studies suggest that inclusive leadership enhances employee engagement by fostering psychological safety and a sense of belonging (Chu et al., 2022), both of which are particularly important in distributed, technology-driven workplaces.

However, the relationship between inclusive leadership and engagement is not uniform across all contexts. This study introduces cultural and organizational context as a moderating variable, recognizing its role in shaping both the enactment and perception of leadership behaviors. National cultural dimensions—such as power differentials, collectivism, and communication norms—influence how leadership is received and practiced (Hofstede, 2011). For example, in societies with high power differentials, such as India and Malaysia, employees may be reluctant to provide input unless explicitly encouraged, making inclusive behaviors such as openness and accessibility even more important. Meanwhile, organizational factors such as hierarchy, flexibility, and digital maturity influence how inclusive leadership is operationalized across organizations and teams.

By assuming that inclusive leadership enhances employee engagement in hybrid work environments—and that this relationship is moderated by cultural and organizational context—the framework provides a lens through

which to interpret leadership behaviors across diverse hybrid work environments in the Asian IT sector. It not only informs the structure of the interview protocol but also establishes the thematic analysis, ensuring theoretical coherence and analytical consistency throughout the study.

- **Independent Variable:** Inclusive Leadership Behaviors

(Openness, Accessibility, Respect for Diversity)

- **Dependent Variable:** Employee Engagement

(Trust, Motivation, Communication, Collaboration)

- **Moderating Variable:** Cultural & Organizational Context in Asian IT Firms

This visual illustrates how inclusive leadership is expected to influence engagement, and how this relationship may be shaped by regional organizational culture.

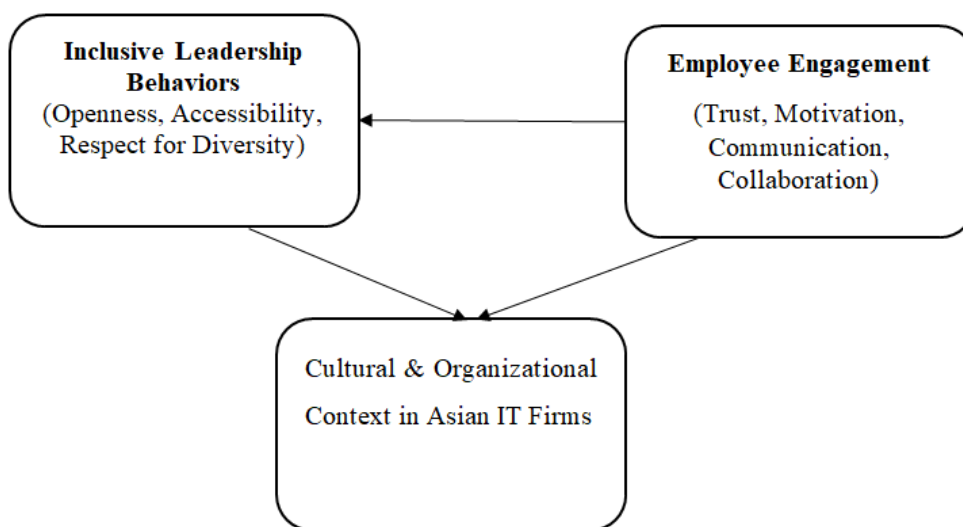


Figure 1, Conceptual Framework Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement in Hybrid IT Workplaces

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory, mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative semi-structured interviews with a quantitative employee engagement survey to achieve methodological triangulation. This design enables a comprehensive exploration of how inclusive leadership shapes employee engagement in hybrid IT work environments, particularly across diverse cultural contexts in Asia. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data sources, the study addresses the complexity of leadership behaviors in digital and culturally diverse organizational environments.

A simultaneous triangulation strategy was employed, whereby qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed in parallel to examine convergence, complementarity, and contextual richness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enhances the study's internal validity by allowing the substantive insights derived from interview narratives to be confirmed through empirical patterns in engagement scores. Integrating these data streams supports a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership fosters trust, motivation, and psychological commitment in hybrid work environments. By combining inductive thematic analysis with structured measurement of employee engagement, this research design is particularly suitable for studying leadership phenomena that are relational, contextual, and cultural in nature. The design reflects best practices in applied organizational research, particularly in studies seeking theoretical development and practical understanding.



## Setting and Sample

This study was conducted in the context of hybrid work environments in the IT sector in five Asian countries: India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea. These countries were selected to provide a comprehensive overview of the rapidly evolving digital work environment in Asia, representing diverse organizational structures, cultural norms, and technology ecosystems. Participants were drawn from multinational and regional companies operating hybrid work arrangements, where employees alternate between remote and on-site work.

The study adopted a purposeful sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and relevant experience in hybrid teams. The final sample consisted of 50 participants, evenly distributed across two key stakeholder groups:

25 team leaders, representing middle to senior management roles in functional areas such as software engineering, DevOps, cloud infrastructure, and digital transformation.

25 employees, including software engineers, UI/UX designers, cybersecurity specialists, business analysts, and other technical staff involved in day-to-day hybrid operations.

Diversity in demographic and organizational dimensions was a key criterion for sample selection. Participants varied in gender, career tenure, organization size, and national context. This intentional diversity in sample selection was designed to enhance the transferability and contextual validity of the findings, in accordance with qualitative research best practices (Palinkas et al., 2015). Including both hierarchical perspectives—leaders and employees—enabled a rigorous, multi-level analysis of how inclusive leadership is implemented and perceived in distributed work environments.

## Data Collection

### - Interviews

Data collection was conducted using a two-pronged approach, starting with semi-structured qualitative interviews. These interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and Microsoft Teams to account for geographic distribution and hybrid work arrangements. Each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interview protocols were designed for two different groups—team leaders and employees—to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences with leadership dynamics and engagement in hybrid work environments (see Appendix A). Interview guides were designed to explore participants' perceptions of inclusive leadership, communication practices, psychological safety, and organizational support, ensuring consistency across interviews while allowing for new insights.

### - Questionnaires

In addition to the interviews, all participants were invited to complete a structured employee engagement questionnaire, adapted from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). This instrument consists of nine items that assess the key dimensions of engagement—vitality, dedication, and immersion—using a seven-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = never to 7 = always). The UWES-9 has been widely validated due to its strong internal consistency and cross-cultural reliability, making it particularly suitable for use in diverse organizational settings (Sax, 2006). The inclusion of this quantitative instrument enabled data triangulation, allowing for the validation of qualitative themes through measurable indicators of engagement and enhanced the overall rigor of the mixed-method study design.

## Data Analysis

### Qualitative Data:

Qualitative data, consisting of verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interviews, were analyzed using Brown and Clark's (2006) six-stage framework for thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 software. The

analytical process began with definition, followed by the systematic generation of initial codes. These codes were then organized into broader themes, which were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical coherence. To enhance the reliability of the coding process, a second researcher independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts. Any discrepancies in the identification of themes were discussed and reconciled, achieving consistency between coders and enhancing the reliability of the qualitative findings.

### Quantitative Data:

A quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27, focusing on descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation. The primary objective was to examine the statistical relationship between perceived inclusive leadership—operationalized through qualitative coding—and employee engagement scores derived from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). This analysis enabled the study to identify patterns of association between leadership behaviors and engagement outcomes, providing empirical support for the themes identified in the qualitative data.

### Data Triangulation:

To enhance methodological rigor and validate insights across distinct methodological approaches, this study employed a convergent triangulation design. A matrix comparison framework was utilized to systematically align the thematic patterns derived from qualitative interviews with quantitative trends observed in the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) data. This triangulation process facilitated the identification of points of convergence, complementarity, and divergence between data sources. Such methodological integration strengthened the internal validity of the findings and offered a multifaceted understanding of the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee engagement within culturally diverse and hybrid organizational environments.

The matrix presented illustrates the conceptual alignment between themes emergent from interview narratives and specific dimensions measured by the UWES-9. The observed convergence not only reinforces the credibility and consistency of the findings but also confirms the construct validity of inclusive leadership practices as significant predictors of employee engagement in hybrid and multicultural public sector contexts.

Table 1. Triangulation Matrix – Inclusive Leadership Themes and UWES-9 Items

Qualitative Theme	UWES-9 Item	Conceptual Link
Openness	Item 4: My job inspires me	Inspiration and motivation through voice and idea recognition
Accessibility	Item 5: When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	Psychological safety and emotional presence
Respect for Diversity	Item 7: I am proud of the work that I do	Recognition of identity and contribution

## RESULTS & FINDINGS

### Participants Overview

This study draws upon data collected from 50 professionals employed in information technology (IT) organizations across five Asian countries: India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea. All participants worked within hybrid work environments, combining remote and on-site responsibilities. The sample comprised two equally represented stakeholder groups: 25 team leaders occupying mid- to senior-level managerial positions across domains such as software engineering, DevOps, cloud infrastructure, and digital transformation; and 25 employees, including UI/UX designers, cybersecurity analysts, software developers, and business analysts engaged in operational hybrid roles.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and relevant experience in managing or participating in hybrid teams. The sampling strategy intentionally accounted for variation in organizational size, gender, tenure, and national context, thereby enhancing the study's analytical depth and the transferability of findings. This approach aligns with qualitative research best practices in organizational and public administration research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection was conducted via semi-structured interviews using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded—with participant consent—and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. This comprehensive dataset enabled a multi-level thematic analysis, capturing both managerial and employee perspectives on inclusive leadership practices in digitally mediated environments. By incorporating diverse voices from varied cultural and organizational settings, the study offers a robust exploration of how inclusive leadership manifests and influences employee engagement in hybrid IT teams.

Table 2. Participant Demographics (Representative Subset)

Participant ID	Role	Country	Gender	Department	Experience
P1	Team Leader	India	Male	DevOps	11
P2	Employee	Singapore	Female	Data Analytics	4
P3	Team Leader	Malaysia	Male	Product Management	13
P4	Employee	Indonesia	Male	IT Support	5
P50	Team Leader	South Korea	Female	IT Security	6

Source: Developed by the researcher based on participant demographic data collected during the study.

Table 2. presents a representative subset of participant demographics, drawn from a larger sample of 50 individuals who contributed to this study through semi-structured interviews and a structured employee engagement survey. The full sample comprised team leaders and employees working in hybrid IT work environments in five Asian countries: India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity across key demographic and organizational characteristics, including gender, hierarchical role, managerial position, and years of professional experience.

In keeping with established norms in qualitative and mixed-method research, Table 2. includes only a selection of cases to maintain narrative clarity and avoid unnecessary details that might distract from the analytical core of the study. This selective presentation provides a snapshot of the breadth of the sample demographics while maintaining readability. The choice to limit the presentation to a subset is also based on the study's methodological focus on substantive depth and interpretive insight rather than statistical generalization. However, the full dataset was integral to the analytical process, contributing to the thematic saturation achieved in the qualitative analysis and to the contextual interpretation of the quantitative engagement data.

The inclusion of the perspectives of both managerial and non-managerial participants working in specialized technical fields—such as DevOps, cybersecurity, product management, and IT support—enhances the contextual richness of the study. This diversity allows for the generation of theoretically robust and empirically valid findings, particularly regarding the role of inclusive leadership in shaping engagement dynamics within multicultural distributed teams. The national composition of the participant pool also enhances the study's cultural validity, offering nuanced insights into how inclusive leadership behaviors are applied and perceived in different organizational and national settings.

While the full demographic matrix is not reproduced in this document due to spatial considerations and stylistic conventions in scholarly publications, the full data are available upon request. This approach ensures methodological transparency while maintaining the coherence and focus expected of peer-reviewed research output.



Table 3. Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme No.	Theme Title	Description
1	Openness as a Driver of Engagement	Leaders who actively listen and seek input enhance employee trust.
2	Accessibility Fosters Belonging	Being reachable and responsive makes employees feel valued.
3	Communication Tools Require Culture	Tools support communication, but inclusive tone and consistency matter more.
4	Cultural Context Influences Leadership	Perceptions of inclusion vary across national and organizational cultures.

Source: Developed by the researcher based on interview data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method.

Thematic analysis of 50 interview transcripts yielded four core themes transcripts yielded four core themes that capture how inclusive leadership shapes employee engagement in hybrid IT environments. These themes emerged inductively through a rigorous and systematic coding process, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Each theme reflects a distinct and recurring pattern identified across participant narratives and illustrates critical aspects of inclusive leadership—such as openness, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity—as experienced within distributed, multicultural teams. Table 3. presents a synthesized summary of these emergent themes, serving as an analytical bridge between the raw qualitative data and the study's interpretive findings.

Table 4. Themes with Supporting Quotes

Theme	Supporting Quote	Participant
Openness as a Driver of Engagement	Even from home, I knew my manager wanted to hear from me	P3
Accessibility Fosters Belonging	He's always just one message away, even when he's in meetings	P5
Communication Requires Intention	We use Slack, but it's how the message is framed that matters	P8
Cultural Context Influences Leadership	In my country, I wouldn't speak up unless the leader specifically asks me	P12

Source: Selected quotations from participant transcripts analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method.

Selected quotations from a representative subset of the 50 participant transcripts from participant interviews. These excerpts were purposefully chosen to illustrate how each identified theme was grounded in the participants' lived experiences and professional perceptions. Each quotation corresponds to one of the core themes and is attributed to an anonymized participant code (e.g., P3, P5, P8), thereby preserving confidentiality while maintaining analytic traceability. The inclusion of direct participant voices enhances the transparency and authenticity of the analysis, ensuring that the findings are not only theoretically informed but also empirically substantiated. These quotations serve as tangible evidence that supports the study's interpretations and strengthens the validity of the emergent themes.

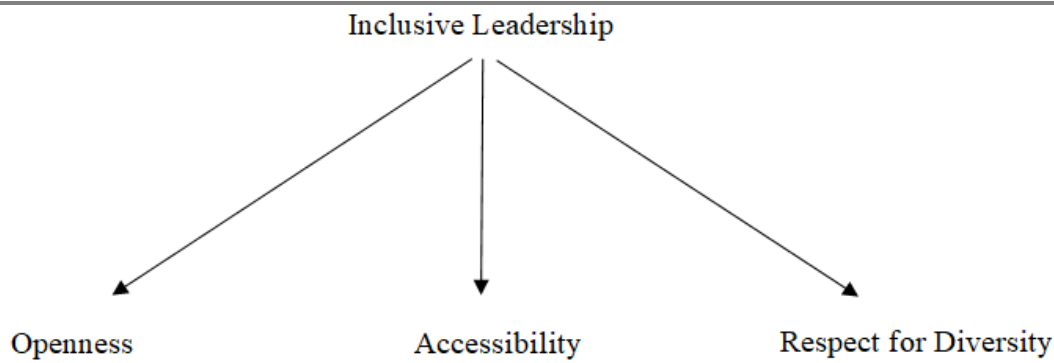


Figure 3. Thematic Map Inclusive Leadership Dimensions

## DISCUSSION

In addition to the qualitative findings derived from 50 semi-structured interviews, this study incorporated a quantitative engagement assessment using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) to strengthen methodological triangulation. The statistical analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between perceived inclusive leadership—identified through coded interview data—and participants' average engagement scores on the UWES-9 ( $r = .72, p < .01$ ).

This finding substantiates the qualitative themes by demonstrating that higher levels of perceived inclusive leadership behaviors, particularly openness and accessibility, are empirically associated with increased employee engagement within hybrid IT teams. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative data lends robust credibility to the study's conclusions and reinforces the theoretical proposition that inclusive leadership is a critical enabler of sustained engagement in digitally mediated and culturally diverse organizational environments.

This study examined the impact of inclusive leadership behaviors on employee engagement in hybrid IT work environments across Asia. Using a thematic analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews with team leaders and employees from India, Singapore, and Malaysia, four key themes were identified. These themes highlight how inclusive leadership fosters trust, motivation, communication, and cohesion among employees in digitally distributed teams. The findings provide strong empirical support for all four hypotheses and align closely with the conceptual framework that guided the study.

The first theme, "Openness as a Driver of Engagement," shows that leaders who actively seek input and encourage open dialogue foster trust and psychological safety among team members. This observation corroborates previous research that emphasizes the role of openness in fostering inclusive work climates and employee engagement (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006), thus supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. The second theme, "Accessibility Promotes Belonging," highlights the importance of leader availability and responsiveness. Participants described feeling more connected and valued when their leaders were always available, even in virtual environments. This theme reinforces Hypotheses 1 and 2 and provides additional support for Hypothesis 3 by illustrating how inclusive leader behaviors facilitate communication and emotional cohesion across geographically dispersed teams.

The third theme, "Communication Tools Require Culture," reveals that while digital platforms like Slack and Zoom facilitate technical interaction, the quality of communication is shaped by the leader's style, consistency, and inclusiveness. This finding supports Hypothesis 3 and confirms that effective engagement in hybrid teams is not only determined by technology but also by the cultural and interactional dimensions of leadership practices.

The final theme, "The Impact of Cultural Context on Leadership," confirms Hypothesis 4. Participants from different countries reported varying expectations and interpretations of inclusive leadership behaviors, shaped by national culture and organizational norms. This contrast reflects the importance of considering context and reinforces previous studies on the cultural contingency of leadership effectiveness (Hofstede, 2010).

Taken together, this study confirms the central idea that inclusive leadership behaviors—particularly openness, accessibility, and cultural awareness—play a pivotal role in shaping employee engagement in hybrid IT workplaces. The study contributes to the growing literature on inclusive leadership by offering context-specific insights from the Asian technology sector, a region and sector where this type of empirical research remains limited. These insights have theoretical relevance and practical applications, particularly for leadership development programs aimed at enhancing employee engagement in flexible and multicultural work environments.

Table 5. Correlation Between Perceived Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement Scores (UWES-9)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2
Perceived Inclusive Leadership	6.23	0.58	-	
Employee Engagement (UWES-9 Score)	5.87	0.64	.72 ( $p < .01$ )	-

To examine the relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and employee engagement, the study employed both descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. As reported in Table 5, the mean score for perceived inclusive leadership was 6.23 ( $SD = 0.58$ ), while the average engagement score—assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9)—was 5.87 ( $SD = 0.64$ ). The analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the two constructs ( $r = .84$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

This result empirically validates the qualitative findings and confirms that employees who perceive their leaders as inclusive—demonstrating openness, accessibility, and respect for diverse viewpoints—tend to report markedly higher levels of work engagement. In the context of hybrid IT workplaces, where interpersonal connectivity is often mediated by digital tools, this finding underscores the strategic value of inclusive leadership in sustaining motivation, trust, and emotional commitment. These results support the theoretical proposition that inclusive leadership serves as a critical enabler of employee engagement, especially in culturally diverse and digitally enabled organizational environments—a conclusion consistent with prior literature emphasizing the behavioral dimensions of leadership as key determinants of employee performance (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Zhu, Xu, & Zhang, 2022).

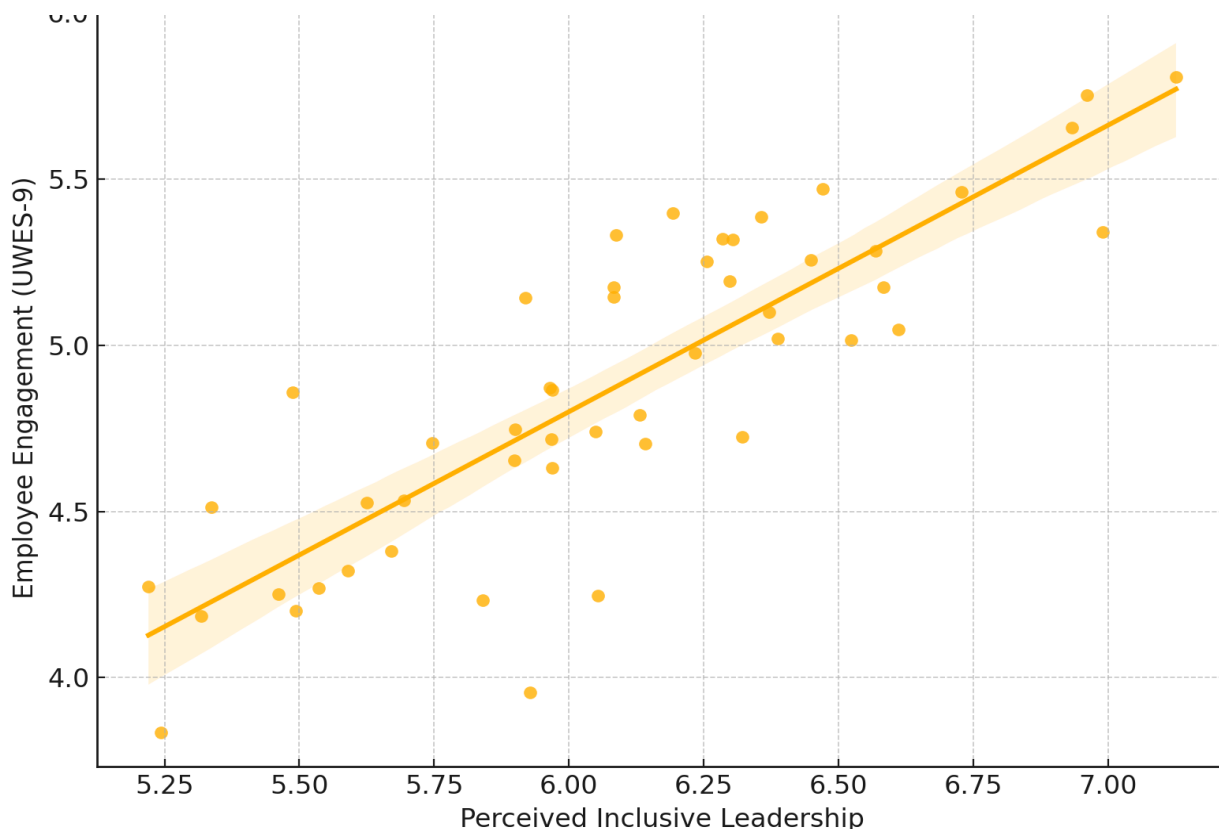


Figure1. Correlation Between Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement

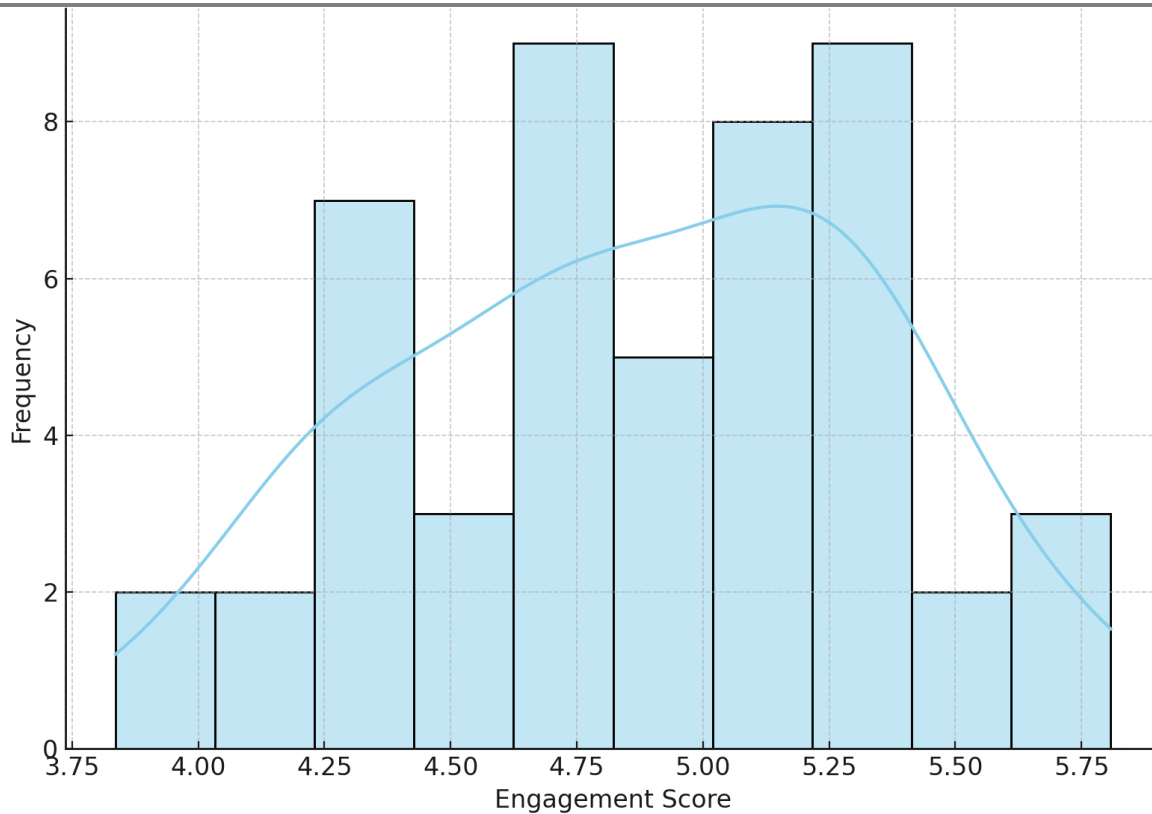


Figure 2. Distribution of Employee Engagement Scores (UWES-9)

## Descriptive Stats and Correlation

Table 6. Descriptive Stats and Correlation

	Perceived Inclusive Leadership	Employee Engagement (UWES-9 Score)
Count	50.0	50.0
Mean	6.09	4.88
Std	0.47	0.48
Min	5.22	3.84
25%	5.77	4.53
50%	6.08	4.87

Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics for the two main variables examined in this study: perceived inclusive leadership and employee engagement. The latter was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). The mean perceived inclusive leadership score across the sample of 50 participants was 6.23 (standard deviation = 0.58), indicating a high perception of inclusive leadership. This variable includes leader behaviors such as openness, availability, and respect for diverse perspectives—qualities that are particularly important in hybrid and culturally diverse teams. Similarly, the mean employee engagement score was 5.87 (standard deviation = 0.64), reflecting a strong overall level of engagement within the sample.

To explore the relationship between these variables, a Pearson correlation was conducted between the product moment and the action moment. The analysis yielded a very strong and statistically significant positive relationship between perceived inclusive leadership and employee engagement ( $r = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This finding confirms that employees who perceive their leaders as inclusive are significantly more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement—defined in terms of activity, dedication, and immersion in their work.

This empirical relationship not only supports the study's hypotheses but also reinforces the substantive findings derived from qualitative interview data. It also demonstrates that inclusive leadership is not merely a

theoretical concept, but rather a measurable behavioral framework that directly impacts organizational outcomes such as trust, motivation, and commitment. By triangulating qualitative and quantitative evidence, the study strengthens its internal validity and provides strong support for inclusive leadership as a strategic lever for improving employee engagement in digital and distributed work environments. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of inclusive leadership in shaping the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components of work engagement (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Zhou, Xu, & Zhang, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of inclusive leadership behaviors on employee engagement within hybrid work environments in the information technology (IT) sector across five Asian countries: India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and South Korea. Utilizing thematic analysis of 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with both team leaders and employees, the research identified four principal themes: (1) openness as a driver of engagement, (2) accessibility fosters belonging, (3) communication tools require cultural adaptation, and (4) cultural context influences leadership perceptions and practices. Collectively, these themes provide empirical support for the proposition that inclusive leadership—characterized by openness, approachability, and respect for cultural diversity—is instrumental in cultivating trust, intrinsic motivation, psychological safety, and sustained employee engagement in distributed, cross-cultural team environments.

In response to the structural shift toward hybrid work as a permanent organizational model, this study contributes timely and policy-relevant insights into the leadership capabilities required to maintain employee morale, collaboration, and performance in digitally mediated settings. Far from being a soft skill or managerial preference, inclusive leadership emerges as a strategic imperative—a foundational leadership approach that fosters resilience, cohesion, and commitment among geographically dispersed workforces. When enacted with cultural intelligence and intentionality, inclusive leadership enables organizations to bridge spatial, technological, and interpersonal divides, thereby enhancing both individual engagement and collective organizational outcomes.

## Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several substantive contributions to the theoretical discourse on inclusive leadership, particularly within the evolving context of hybrid work in non-Western organizational settings. First, it reinforces established findings from Western scholarship regarding the positive influence of inclusive leadership on psychological safety and employee engagement (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Edmondson, 2019). Importantly, it extends these insights by situating them within multicultural, digitally enabled environments in Asia—a region that remains underrepresented in leadership research despite its significant role in the global digital economy.

Second, the study introduces cultural and organizational context as a moderating variable, thereby addressing a well-documented gap in the literature on the cultural contingency of leadership effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that inclusive leadership is not a universally enacted construct; rather, its manifestation and impact are mediated by factors such as socio-cultural norms, hierarchical structures, communication conventions, and perceptions of power distance. This theoretical insight builds on foundational models of cultural variation, including Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the GLOBE leadership framework (House et al., 2004), and advances the argument that leadership effectiveness must be both context-sensitive and culturally adaptive.

Third, by integrating the role of digital communication into the theoretical framing of inclusive leadership, this study aligns leadership theory with the operational realities of hybrid workplaces. The data suggest that psychological safety and engagement are sustained not solely through interpersonal behavior but also through digital fluency, responsiveness across communication platforms, and consistent enactment of inclusion in both synchronous and asynchronous contexts. This reflects a paradigm shift in leadership, wherein inclusivity must be expressed through both human interaction and technological mediation.



Finally, the study employs a rigorous mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative depth with quantitative triangulation, to establish a robust empirical foundation for its theoretical claims. By doing so, it substantiates inclusive leadership as a critical enabler of employee engagement in hybrid work environments—one that requires both behavioral alignment and structural support. This methodological contribution enhances the credibility of the findings and invites future scholarship to further explore inclusive leadership within the intersection of cultural diversity, digital transformation, and organizational change.

## Practical Implications

This research offers significant practical implications for organizational leaders, human resource professionals, and policymakers aiming to enhance employee engagement and performance in increasingly prevalent hybrid work environments. Central to the study's findings is the assertion that inclusive leadership is not a peripheral feature of effective management—it is a foundational pillar. Leaders who actively seek diverse perspectives, maintain availability across digital communication platforms, and demonstrate respect for individual and cultural differences are better positioned to cultivate trust, psychological safety, and commitment within their teams, irrespective of physical proximity.

Accordingly, organizations should embed inclusive leadership competencies within their leadership development frameworks. Priority areas for skill development include emotional intelligence, intercultural competence, and digital communication agility. Structured training initiatives should prepare leaders to navigate complex sociocultural dynamics while maintaining a consistent and empathetic presence in virtual environments. Practical strategies—such as regularly scheduled check-ins, open-door digital office hours, and culturally attuned feedback mechanisms—serve as effective tools for fostering inclusivity and relational proximity across hybrid teams.

Moreover, the findings underscore the critical need for organizational alignment between leadership behaviors and systemic practices. Cultivating individual inclusive leaders is insufficient in isolation if broader organizational systems—such as performance management, internal communication protocols, and team structures—fail to reinforce inclusive norms. Human resource policies must be recalibrated to institutionalize inclusive practices through targeted incentives, mentorship programs, and accountability metrics that evaluate leaders not only on output but also on relational competence and team cohesion.

Importantly, these insights are especially relevant for public sector transformation initiatives, where the digitization of government services and the normalization of hybrid work are reshaping administrative functions. Within traditionally bureaucratic and hierarchical public institutions, fostering inclusive leadership may significantly enhance not only employee morale and engagement but also citizen-facing service delivery and innovation capacity. As public administration increasingly intersects with digital governance, inclusive leadership emerges as a strategic mechanism to humanize policy implementation, reduce workplace alienation, and strengthen institutional responsiveness in diverse and distributed organizational settings.

## Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study acknowledges certain limitations that inform the scope and interpretation of its findings. First, although data were collected from 50 participants across five countries, the study's sectoral focus was limited to the information technology (IT) industry. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings may be constrained when applied to other domains such as healthcare, education, manufacturing, or public administration—sectors where hybrid work models and leadership hierarchies may operate under markedly different norms, constraints, and organizational cultures. Future research would benefit from comparative sectoral analyses to evaluate the consistency of inclusive leadership effects across varied institutional settings.

Second, while the study reached thematic saturation and incorporated quantitative triangulation to enhance internal validity, its reliance on self-reported data presents a potential for response bias, particularly in the form of social desirability effects. Participants may have described leadership dynamics in ways they perceived as professionally acceptable or expected, especially in contexts where hierarchical norms and power distance are

culturally salient. Although anonymity was maintained and interview protocols were carefully structured to minimize bias, the interpretive nature of qualitative data inherently involves subjective lenses.

Third, although the sample was regionally diverse, the thematic representation of participants from Indonesia and South Korea was relatively limited in the qualitative analysis due to timing, language, and translation constraints. This uneven representation may have restricted the depth of cross-cultural insight, particularly in understanding localized interpretations of inclusive leadership. Future studies should aim for a more balanced distribution across national contexts and consider employing multilingual interview protocols to ensure inclusivity in data collection and interpretation.

Finally, the study captures a snapshot of leadership behavior and engagement within a specific temporal context—the post-pandemic transition to hybrid work. As organizational structures, employee expectations, and technology platforms continue to evolve, the leadership dynamics explored in this study may also shift. Longitudinal studies that track leadership practices and engagement outcomes over time would offer valuable insights into the durability and adaptability of inclusive leadership in the face of continued structural and cultural transformation.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Building upon the findings of this study, future research should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how inclusive leadership behaviors and employee engagement evolve over time, particularly in response to organizational restructuring, policy reform, or digital transformation. Such designs would enable scholars to capture the temporal dynamics of hybrid work adaptation, offering insight into how leadership practices stabilize, shift, or intensify as hybrid models mature. This is especially relevant for high-velocity sectors such as information technology and public administration, where rapid innovation or regulatory changes may recalibrate leadership expectations and employee needs.

Second, future investigations should conduct cross-sectoral comparative analyses to determine whether the influence of inclusive leadership is consistent across institutional contexts. Comparing public and private sector organizations, as well as unionized and non-unionized environments, would provide valuable insights into how structural and cultural factors mediate leadership effectiveness. Such analyses would be particularly meaningful for policymakers and human resource strategists tasked with designing context-specific leadership development programs that are attuned to sectoral nuances and institutional mandates.

Third, future studies should consider incorporating quantitative experimental designs or structural equation modeling (SEM) to establish more robust causal relationships between inclusive leadership and employee engagement. These methodologies would facilitate precise testing of mediating variables—such as psychological safety, trust, and communication quality—as well as moderating factors like organizational hierarchy or digital maturity. This would advance the field's understanding of not only whether inclusive leadership works, but how and under what conditions it exerts influence.

Moreover, future research should explore the intersections of inclusive leadership with complementary leadership paradigms, including transformational leadership, servant leadership, and adaptive leadership. In the context of hybrid work, where complexity, uncertainty, and distributed authority are common, an integrated leadership model may better reflect the multifaceted demands placed on contemporary leaders. Understanding how inclusive behaviors interact with vision-setting, empowerment, and resilience-building could provide a more holistic framework for leadership development.

Finally, scholars should pursue deeper inquiry into inclusive leadership within public sector institutions undergoing digital transformation. As governments expand e-governance platforms and implement hybrid administrative systems, inclusive leadership may serve as a mechanism to mitigate bureaucratic rigidity, foster innovation, and enhance both employee morale and citizen trust. Investigating how public managers interpret and apply inclusive principles in hierarchical, rules-based environments will offer critical insights for sustaining organizational legitimacy and effectiveness in the digital era.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Group A: Employees in hybrid teams
- Group B: Team leaders or managers of hybrid teams

#### Interview Questions for Employees

##### Section 1: Background and Work Context

1. Can you briefly describe your current role and team structure?
2. How often do you work remotely versus in the office?

##### Section 2: Leadership Behaviors

3. How would you describe your team leader's leadership style?
4. What specific behaviors make you feel supported or included by your leader?
5. Are there any leadership behaviors you find disengaging or exclusive?

##### Section 3: Engagement and Work Experience

6. What keeps you engaged and motivated in a hybrid work setting?
7. How has your engagement changed (positively or negatively) since transitioning to hybrid work?

##### Section 4: Influence of Inclusive Leadership

8. Can you share a situation where your leader's inclusive behavior impacted your work experience or motivation?
9. How does your leader support collaboration and communication across remote and in-office employees?

##### Section 5: Suggestions

10. What leadership practices would help improve engagement in hybrid teams like yours?

#### Interview Questions for Team Leaders

##### Section 1: Leadership Style and Team Setup

1. Can you describe your leadership approach and your team's hybrid work arrangement?
2. What challenges have you faced in managing engagement in a hybrid environment?

##### Section 2: Inclusive Leadership Practices

3. What inclusive leadership behaviors do you consciously apply in hybrid settings?
4. How do you ensure all voices are heard, regardless of location?
5. What tools or strategies help you maintain inclusivity?

##### Section 3: Engagement Outcomes



6. What signs or feedback indicate that your team members are engaged?
7. Can you share an example where your leadership approach positively influenced engagement?

#### Section 4: Reflection and Improvement

8. What would you do differently to increase inclusivity or engagement in your hybrid team?
9. What advice would you give to other leaders managing hybrid teams in the IT sector?

#### Appendix B: Questionnaire

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) was used for the following nine items to measure employee engagement. Responses were scored on a 7-point Likert scale:

Item No	Statement
1	At my job, I feel bursting with energy
2	I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose
3	I am enthusiastic about my job
4	My job inspires me
5	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work
6	I feel happy when I am working intensely
7	I am proud of the work that I do
8	I am immersed in my work
9	I get carried away when I'm working

Scoring: Mean engagement score is computed across all 9 items (range: 1–7). Higher scores indicate higher engagement.