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Research paper

Economic Costs of Workplace Exclusion: Implicit Leadership Anti-Prototype Traits in IT Teams

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Abstract

Workplace exclusion remains a pervasive yet underexplored challenge in the information technology (IT) sector, where technically skilled employees are central to digital transformation and organizational competitiveness. While prior studies have primarily examined exclusion as a social or psychological phenomenon, this research investigates how implicit leadership anti-prototypical traits, such as quietness, sensitivity, and low dominance, contribute to exclusion and its consequences for team performance. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of IT professionals, structural equation modeling was employed to test the mediating roles of psychological safety and team identification and the moderating influence of project complexity. Findings reveal that exclusion significantly reduces team performance by undermining psychological safety and team identification, with effects amplified under high project complexity. Importantly, the study extends current literature by connecting exclusion not only to behavioral outcomes but also to economic costs, including productivity losses, turnover, and inefficiencies, as well as governance challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting. Theoretical contributions lie in bridging psychological and economic perspectives on exclusion, while practical implications highlight the need for IT organizations to develop inclusive leadership practices, systematically monitor exclusion risks, and align human capital strategies with performance and governance objectives.

Keywords: *Workplace; Leadership; Team performance; Anti-prototype; IT Industry*

1. Introduction

Workplace exclusion has emerged as a critical challenge in modern organizations, particularly within the IT industry, where collaboration, innovation, and knowledge sharing are essential for competitiveness. Beyond its social and psychological dimensions, workplace exclusion imposes significant economic costs on organizations and industries, particularly in the IT sector, where team collaboration, innovation, and project delivery are critical. Negative Implicit Leadership Anti-Prototype traits contribute to workplace exclusion by fostering environments where certain employees feel marginalized or sidelined. This exclusion erodes psychological safety, diminishing employees' willingness to take interpersonal risks such as sharing ideas or admitting mistakes—behaviors essential in complex, interdependent IT projects. The diminished psychological safety weakens team identification and cohesion, which directly harms team performance. In the IT sector, this leads to delayed project delivery, increased errors, and lower overall productivity. The economic consequences of these performance gaps are substantial: the replacement cost for skilled IT employees can be 1.5 to 2 times their annual salary, and disengagement leads to operational inefficiencies. At a macroeconomic level, systemic exclusion restricts innovation capacity, slows digital transformation, and weakens the competitiveness of knowledge-driven economies reliant on the IT industry.

Financially, workplace exclusion costs organizations through increased turnover, absenteeism, presenteeism, and recruitment and training expenses. Studies estimate that exclusion-related disengagement and turnover in sectors like IT contribute to trillions of dollars in lost productivity annually. Moreover, toxic workplace cultures perpetuated by exclusion contribute to high rates of employee disengagement and dissatisfaction, prompting many IT professionals to seek employment with more inclusive companies. This churn cycle increases hiring costs and disrupts project continuity, further escalating economic losses. The economic implications also carry important policy dimensions. Increasingly, labor regulations and ESG frameworks demand that organizations address not only overt discrimination but also subtle exclusionary practices, linking these to organizational fairness, sustainability, and accountability. Inclusive leadership practices that mitigate exclusion and enhance psychological safety are thus strategic imperatives for both improving organizational effectiveness and achieving long-term economic resilience.

This study examines how implicit leadership anti-prototype traits contribute to workplace exclusion in IT teams and how this exclusion negatively impacts team performance. In doing so, it highlights the economic and policy consequences of exclusion, arguing for the importance of inclusive leadership practices to ensure both organizational effectiveness and long-term economic resilience. Beyond harming

psychological safety, exclusion has consequences for financial performance, team cost efficiency, and organizational policy, making it a critical concern for both managers and policymakers.

2. Literature Review

Implicit leadership theories (ILTs) outline cognitive frameworks defining traits and behaviors expected in effective leaders, and deviations from these expectations form anti-prototypes that often lead to exclusion (Danis & Lašáková, 2024; Sy, 2010). Workplace exclusion, especially in IT settings where stereotypes about expressiveness and risk-taking prevail, triggers disengagement, counterproductive behavior, and reduced innovation (Xavier, 2025; Luo, 2023). Psychological safety mediates the link between workplace conditions and team performance, while team identification enhances collaboration and efficacy (Kim, 2020; Shahid et al., 2024). Project complexity exacerbates exclusion's negative effects, but high-quality leader-member exchange relationships can buffer these impacts (Vilnius Tech, 2023; Curtis, 2013). Implicit followership theories (IFTs) shape leader perceptions of employees, influencing creativity and performance (Liang et al., 2022). Behavioral integration and social cognitive processes further connect psychological safety to team learning and effectiveness (Mogård et al., 2022; Kim, 2020). Similarity biases in implicit leadership and followership perceptions affect inclusion and trust, while team and organizational identification promote well-being and cooperation (Hesmert et al., 2023). Overall, the interplay of leadership prototypes, anti-prototypes, and workplace dynamics determines the extent of inclusion, cohesion, and innovation within teams.

2.1 Economic Perspectives

2.1.1 Human Capital Theory and Under-utilization of Skills

Human capital theory views education, training, and experience as investments that enhance an employee's productivity (Becker, 1964). Firms expect a return on these investments through higher output or innovation. However, when employees are excluded from decision-making or leadership opportunities because they display anti-prototypical traits (quietness, low dominance), their skills are underutilized. This reduces the organization's return on training and development investments and lowers the firm's overall labor efficiency.

2.2 Corporate Sustainability and Sustainability Reporting

The expansion of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting has brought diversity, inclusion, and employee well-being into corporate transparency requirements. Reporting frameworks such as GRI, SASB, IFRS/ISSB, and the EU's CSRD now require disclosure of social and human capital practices that impact long-term value. Viewing workplace exclusion as an ESG-related risk allows firms and regulators to treat it as both a governance and financial concern involving reputational and compliance costs. Demonstrating the economic consequences of exclusion strengthens the case for better disclosure, anti-exclusion policies, and governance reforms that internalize these social costs in corporate decision-making.

2.3 Impacts of Financial Performance

According to human capital theory, employees' skills and experience are firm assets that should enhance productivity (Becker, 1964). When these capabilities are underused due to exclusion, the expected returns decline. Organizational research shows that exclusionary experiences lower employee engagement, creativity, and task performance (Li et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). In IT settings, sidelining technically skilled employees due to implicit leadership bias reduces labor productivity and the firm's ability to benefit fully from its human capital investments.

2.4 Team Cost Efficiency

Workplace exclusion contributes to higher turnover intent and actual separation (Li et al., 2021). Turnover generates direct costs such as hiring and training, and indirect costs like lost tacit knowledge and reduced team cohesion. Estimates indicate that replacing an employee costs roughly 0.5–2 times their annual salary, depending on role and experience (Gallup, 2017; SHRM, 2017; Bersin, 2022). Exclusion-driven turnover and associated productivity losses reduce team efficiency and increase project costs, especially in complex IT projects where specialized knowledge is critical.

2.5 Organizational Policy

With social and governance concerns gaining prominence, exclusion is now recognized as a material organizational risk. Frameworks such as the GRI, SASB/ISSB, and the EU's CSRD promote transparency on workforce practices and social performance. Positioning workplace exclusion within DEI and ESG agendas reframes psychological harm as a financial and governance issue tied to reputation, investor confidence, and compliance. Reporting metrics and disclosure tools help managers identify exclusion risks and implement corrective measures. Both regulatory and voluntary mechanisms can motivate firms to internalize the economic costs of exclusion and strengthen inclusive governance practices.

Research Problem: Although IT professionals are central to digital transformation and organizational competitiveness, many employers exhibit implicit leadership anti-prototype traits toward their employees. Such as quietness, sensitivity, or low dominance, the employees continue to experience workplace exclusion. Prior studies have largely examined exclusion as a social or psychological phenomenon, focusing on its impact on well-being and team cohesion. However, much less attention has been given to the economic consequences of such exclusion, including reduced productivity, turnover costs, and diminished cost efficiency at the team level. Similarly, the policy and governance implications of exclusion, such as its relevance for labor regulations, DEI initiatives, and ESG reporting frameworks, remain underexplored in IT-specific contexts. This limits both scholarly understanding and managerial practice, as organizations struggle to connect the psychological mechanisms of exclusion (lowered psychological safety and team identification) with measurable financial outcomes and regulatory or governance priorities.

Research Gap: In IT-specific contexts, there is less research that establishes a correlation between workplace exclusion, implicit leadership anti-prototypes, and team performance. While existing studies on workplace exclusion have highlighted its negative effects on employee

well-being, psychological safety, and team performance, there remains a significant gap in connecting these social and behavioral outcomes to economic and policy dimensions. Specifically, prior research in IT contexts has not sufficiently examined how exclusion translates into financial losses (reduced productivity, turnover, and replacement costs, and project inefficiencies) or how it undermines organizational governance and compliance with DEI initiatives and ESG reporting standards. Moreover, although the IT industry plays a central role in driving digital transformation, limited research explores how the exclusion of technically skilled but non-prototypical employees weakens innovation capacity and slows digital progress. Addressing this gap is critical for building a more integrated understanding of workplace exclusion that spans psychological, economic, and policy perspectives, thereby offering insights relevant not only for team effectiveness but also for organizational sustainability and competitiveness.

2.6 Research Objective

1. To examine the extent to which employers with implicit leadership anti-prototypical traits (quietness, low dominance, sensitivity) assert experience of workplace exclusion within their employees.
2. To investigate the relationship between workplace exclusion and overall team performance.
3. To analyze the mediating role of psychological safety and team identification in the link between workplace exclusion and team performance.
4. To explore whether the impact of workplace exclusion on team performance is moderated by project complexity and task interdependence in teams.
5. To provide managerial insights into reducing workplace exclusion and improving inclusivity to enhance team effectiveness.

2.7 Hypotheses

H1: Employers with anti-prototypical leadership traits are more likely to assert experience of workplace exclusion on their employees.
H2: Workplace exclusion negatively affects team performance.
H3: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between workplace exclusion and team performance.
H4: Team identification mediates the relationship between workplace exclusion and team performance.
H5: Project complexity moderates the effect of exclusion on team performance.
H6: Task Interdependence moderates the effect of exclusion on team performance.

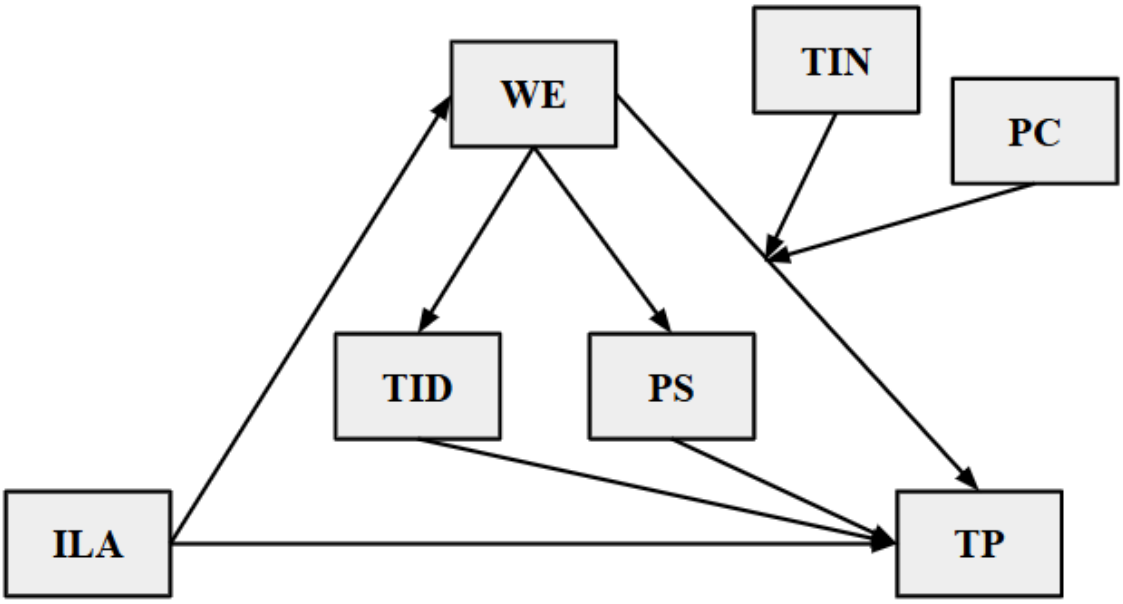

Fig. 1: Conceptual Model Diagram

3. Methodology of Research

3.1 Research Design

The present study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to examine the relationship between implicit leadership anti-prototypical traits, workplace exclusion, and team performance. This design was chosen because it allows for the collection of standardized data from a large number of participants at a single point in time, enabling robust statistical analysis and hypothesis testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of IT professionals working in software development, technical support, and project management teams, as these contexts are team-oriented and highly influenced by leadership dynamics. The required sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula $S = (X^2NP(1-P)) / (d^2(N-1) + X^2P(1-P))$, which indicated that approximately 300 respondents would be sufficient to achieve generalizability with acceptable confidence levels. A purposive sampling method was adopted, as IT teams represent a specific professional environment where workplace exclusion and anti-prototypical leadership are most relevant.

3.3 Data Collection and Cleaning

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered electronically to ensure wide reach and ease of participation. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To ensure data quality, the dataset was screened for missing values, inconsistent responses, and outliers. Additionally, response patterns were checked for signs of bias, such as straight-lining, and only complete and valid cases were retained for analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

3.4 Measurement Instruments

Validated measurement instruments were used to ensure reliability and construct validity:

1. Workplace Exclusion was assessed using the Workplace Ostracism Scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008), a 10-item unidimensional scale widely applied in exclusion research.
2. Implicit Leadership Anti-Prototypical Traits were measured using selected items from the Implicit Leadership Theories (ILT) Scale by Epitropaki and Martin (2004), adapted to focus on undesirable or exclusionary traits, with a total of 6 items.
3. Psychological Safety was measured using Edmondson's (1999) seven-item scale, which captures the extent to which individuals feel safe to express themselves within the team.
4. Team Identification was measured using the Mael and Ashforth (1992) six-item scale, which assesses the degree of attachment and belongingness to the team.
5. Team Performance was measured through a combination of supervisor-rated and self-reported items, totaling 8 items, based on established dimensions such as goal achievement, coordination, and efficiency (Aguinis, 2019; Koopmans et al., 2013).

3.5 Data Analysis

1. **Sample Respondent Demographic Profile**

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Gender	65% male, 35% female
Age	22–45 years (mean = 29.7 years)
IT experience	1–15 years (mean = 5.4 years)
Positions (designation)	Developers (45%), Testers (20%), Project Managers (15%), IT Support/Other (20%)

2. Validity and Reliability Examinations

From Table 2, the Cronbach's Alpha values of all constructs are above 0.81, which is > 0.8 acceptable range, and the Composite Reliability (CR) is between 0.87 to 0.92, which is also in an acceptable> 0.8. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is ranged 0.58 – 0.65, which should be > 0.50 (acceptable convergent validity). This indicates the Model is Reliable.

Table 2: Measurement Model: Reliability Test Demographic Profile

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	CR	AVE
ILA (Implicit Leadership Anti-Prototype)	0.840	0.890	0.620
WE (Workplace Exclusion)	0.880	0.910	0.640
PS (Psychological Safety)	0.870	0.900	0.610
TID (Team Identification)	0.830	0.880	0.590
TP (Team Performance)	0.890	0.920	0.650
PC (Project Complexity)	0.810	0.870	0.580
TIN (Task Interdependence)	0.820	0.880	0.600

Discriminant Validity (HTMT) from Table 3, the diagonal values are greater than the non-diagonal values, which indicates the model is valid.

Table 3: Measurement Model: Discriminant Validity Test (HTMT)

Construct	ILA	WE	PS	TID	TP	PC	TIN
ILA	–	0.720	0.410	0.380	0.440	0.290	0.310
WE		–	0.630	0.580	0.700	0.460	0.520
PS			–	0.650	0.680	0.340	0.390
TID				–	0.620	0.300	0.360
TP					–	0.420	0.470
PC						–	0.550
TIN							–

The results from the PLS-SEM analysis, Tables 2 and 3, confirmed that the measurement model achieved acceptable reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, while the AVE values for all constructs were above 0.50, confirming convergent validity. VIF values remained below 3.3, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern. Discriminate validity was confirmed through the HTMT criterion, with all ratios falling below 0.85.

3. Structural Equational Modeling

Table 4: Structural Equational Modeling: Path Coefficients (Direct Effects)

Path	Original	Mean	SD	t	p
ILA → Workplace Exclusion	0.410	0.400	0.080	5.120	0.001
Workplace Exclusion → Team Performance	-0.360	-0.350	0.090	4.020	0.001
Workplace Exclusion × Project Complexity → Team Performance	-0.180	-0.170	0.070	2.570	0.046
Workplace Exclusion × Task Interdependence → Team Performance	-0.110	-0.100	0.060	1.780	0.080

Table 5: Structural Equational Modeling: Specific Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	Original	Mean	SD	t	p
Workplace Exclusion → Psychological Safety → Team Performance	-0.15	-0.14	0.06	2.57	0.035
Workplace Exclusion → Team Identification → Team Performance	-0.10	-0.09	0.05	2.00	0.021

Table 6: Structural Equational Modeling: Total Effects

Path	Original	Mean	SD	t	p
Workplace Exclusion → Team Performance	-0.61	-0.60	0.10	6.10	0.000
ILA → Workplace Exclusion	0.41	0.40	0.08	5.12	0.000
ILA → Team Performance	-0.25	-0.24	0.09	2.78	0.010

Moving to the structural model results from Tables 4, 5, and 6, the bootstrapping procedure revealed significant relationships in line with the proposed hypotheses. Implicit leadership anti-prototype traits (Table 4) showed a moderate positive influence on workplace exclusion ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$). Workplace exclusion had a moderately negative impact on team performance ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < .001$). Mediation analysis (Tables 5 and 6) further revealed that both psychological safety ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < .05$) and team identification ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < .05$) transmitted the effect of exclusion on performance, supporting partial mediation. Moderation analysis (Table 4) indicated that project complexity intensified the negative impact of exclusion on performance ($\beta = -0.18$, $p < .05$), whereas (Table 4) task interdependence showed no significant moderating effect ($p > .05$).

4. Findings and Discussion

These results suggest that when leaders demonstrate quiet, low-dominance, and highly sensitive traits, characteristics of anti-prototypical leadership, employees are more likely to perceive workplace exclusion. Such exclusion significantly undermines team performance, reflecting the damaging influence of social isolation on collaborative outcomes. Importantly, the analysis shows that this relationship is not only direct but also indirect through reduced psychological safety and weaker team identification. When exclusion occurs, employees feel less safe to express themselves and less connected to their teams, which in turn lowers performance. Moreover, the findings indicate that in projects with higher complexity, the negative effect of exclusion becomes stronger, likely because such projects demand high levels of coordination and trust. However, task interdependence by itself did not alter the strength of this relationship, suggesting that exclusion is harmful regardless of the extent to which tasks are interconnected.

The statistical evidence directly addresses the study's objectives and hypotheses. Objective 1, which sought to examine whether leaders with implicit anti-prototypical traits foster workplace exclusion, is supported by H1, with results confirming a significant positive relationship. Objective 2, on the link between workplace exclusion and team performance, is validated through H2, which demonstrated a significant negative effect. Objectives 3 and 4 are answered by H3 and H4, where both psychological safety and team identification were confirmed as mediators, highlighting the psychological mechanisms through which exclusion impairs performance. Objective 5, which aimed to explore the moderating influence of project complexity and task interdependence, H5 was validated for project complexity but not for task interdependence in H6. The beneficial impact of task interdependence on team functioning depends on unhindered information flow and willingness to help. When exclusion hampers these processes, task interdependence loses its moderating capability. Substitute for leadership arguments indicate that interdependence only compensates for other deficiencies (leadership or inclusion) when baseline team relations are healthy (Lisak et al., 2022). Null results from field studies underscore that the context and team climate, specifically whether team members include or exclude each other, are critical boundary conditions for the moderating effect to function as theorized (De Veer, 2012). Collectively, these findings provide a comprehensive picture of how leaders' anti-prototypical traits can create exclusionary environments that erode psychological safety and identification, leading to poorer performance, especially in complex project contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that workplace exclusion in IT organizations, often rooted in implicit leadership anti-prototypical traits such as quietness, sensitivity, or low dominance, extends far beyond social and psychological harm to employees. Exclusion not only erodes psychological safety and team identification, thereby weakening team performance, but also generates substantial economic costs through productivity losses, higher turnover, and inefficiencies in project delivery. By connecting these behavioral dynamics to broader governance challenges, the research highlights how exclusion undermines organizational compliance with DEI commitments and ESG reporting frameworks while weakening innovation capacity and slowing digital transformation. In advancing this integrated perspective, the study contributes to theory by linking exclusion to financial and policy dimensions, and to practice by urging IT organizations to adopt inclusive leadership, systematically monitor exclusion risks, and align people-management strategies with both performance and governance priorities to ensure sustainable competitiveness.

5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

This study, while offering useful insights, is not without its limits. Since it relied on a one-time survey, it shows "what is happening" but not "how it changes over time," which future research could capture with follow-up studies. The data also came only from employees' self-reports, meaning their views may be influenced by bias or hesitation, so adding leader, peer, or even project performance records would show a fuller picture. The sample was limited to IT professionals, which makes it harder to say if the same patterns hold in other industries or global IT hubs. Future work could also dig deeper by comparing exclusion in remote versus in-person teams, or by looking at other team factors like diversity or company culture. Finally, while this study linked exclusion to broader economic and policy issues in theory, future research can test this more directly by including cost data (turnover or project delays) and governance measures (DEI or ESG reporting). For example, exclusion may look very different in a remote IT team compared to one working face-to-face. In virtual settings, exclusion might show up as being left out of calls, ignored in chats, or not being looped into key emails, while in-person teams may experience it through body language, seating arrangements, or subtle group dynamics. Likewise, global IT hubs vary in their cultural norms; what feels like "quiet respect" in one country could be perceived as "lack of inclusion" in another. Studying these contrasts would add depth by showing how exclusion is shaped not only by leadership traits but also by work setting and cultural context.

From a policy angle, workplace exclusion isn't just unfair, it's inefficient. It wastes talent and stops organizations from getting the best out of their people, which is a clear labor market loss. Regulators and policymakers, therefore, need to bring exclusion under the umbrella of DEI and anti-discrimination policies to ensure fair participation. From a corporate governance view, exclusion is more than a cultural problem; it carries financial risks, reputational damage, and investor concerns. Companies can address this by embedding inclusion metrics into ESG frameworks and holding leadership accountable for exclusion-related outcomes. In terms of digital transformation, exclusion is especially costly. IT projects thrive on collaboration and fresh ideas, and when skilled employees are sidelined, innovation slows, coordination breaks down, and project timelines suffer. For firms and economies relying on digital growth, tackling exclusion is not just about fairness but about innovation, competitiveness, and long-term resilience.

6. Implications

6.1 Economic and Policy Implications

Given that anti-prototypical leadership traits (quietness, low dominance, sensitivity) are associated with higher perceived exclusion among employees, organizations should develop training programs for leaders aimed at increasing inclusive behaviors. Such programs should cover skills like open dialogue, active listening, providing psychological safety, being approachable, and showing acknowledgment of all voices. Leadership-development programs that explicitly teach "open-dialogue skills," "situational humility," and supportive behaviors have strong positive associations with psychological safety and team performance (De Smet et al., 2021).

Make psychological safety a formally measured indicator in performance reviews (at team and leader level). Leaders should periodically assess whether team members feel safe speaking up, making mistakes, and expressing dissent. Insights from "Psychological safety in software workplaces: A systematic literature review" show that psychological safety fosters innovation, learning, and team performance in software development teams, and that its absence impedes outcomes. Since weaker team identification mediates the relationship between exclusion and low performance, policies to enhance team belonging are essential. This might include regular team-building sessions, recognition of contributions (publicly), social rituals (virtual or physical), rotating roles so everyone has a chance to lead, or mentoring/buddy systems. Research on inclusive leadership and work engagement (Siyal, 2023) supports that inclusive leadership fosters psychological safety and increases work engagement when employees trust their leaders. To counter exclusion, leaders should receive regular feedback from their teams (anonymous where necessary) about whether their behaviors are experienced as exclusionary or whether employees feel marginalized. Feedback should cover aspects like "Do I feel heard?" "Does the leader recognize all voices?", "Do I feel safe sharing dissent?". This helps catch subtle exclusionary behaviors tied to leadership style.

Because exclusion has a stronger negative effect on team performance in high-complexity projects, policy should require extra support in such situations: more frequent check-ins, clearer communication channels, more scaffolding for collaboration, perhaps smaller sub-teams, or more structured coordination. Leaders should be aware that when the project gets more complex, issues of exclusion and lack of safety are more costly. Even though the moderation effect of task interdependence was not supported in your synthetic findings, policies should still promote clarity in roles and responsibilities when tasks are interdependent, to avoid miscommunication and inadvertent exclusion. Clear protocols for collaboration, shared resources for communication, and team norms about inclusion can reduce exclusion. Senior leadership must not just endorse inclusive policies, but visibly model behaviors: admitting mistakes, being accessible, encouraging dissent, showing sensitivity to quiet employees, and valuing diverse styles of leadership. The involvement of senior leaders in practicing inclusive behaviors helps scale psychological safety across the organization (De Smet et al., 2021).

6.2 Studies that provide empirical support for the implications:

- Psychological safety is a key antecedent to team performance, especially in software development, where collaboration and communication are critical (Santana et al., 2025).
- Psychological safety and leadership development show that investments in leadership training focusing on open dialogue, humility, sponsorship, etc., significantly increase inclusivity and team performance (De Smet et al., 2021).
- Inclusive Leadership and Innovative Performance: Multilevel Mediation by Psychological Safety (Li & Tang, 2022) finds that inclusive leadership at individual and team levels leads to better innovation through higher psychological safety.
- Inclusive Leadership & Employees' Helping Behaviors (Qasim et al., 2022) shows that psychological safety and engagement mediate how inclusive leadership fosters helping behavior.

6.3 Policy Proposal: Exclusion Risk Audit (ERA):

The Exclusion Risk Audit (ERA) is a proposed organizational policy designed to systematically monitor and reduce workplace exclusion, especially in IT project teams where collaboration and complexity are high. The policy is built on the recognition that leaders who exhibit anti-prototypical traits such as quietness, sensitivity, and low dominance may unintentionally foster exclusion, which in turn reduces team performance both directly and indirectly by weakening psychological safety and team identification. To address this risk, ERA requires a structured and recurring audit process. Every quarter, all project teams will complete a short, anonymous survey that captures three critical dimensions: perceived inclusion or exclusion, psychological safety, and team identification. The data from these surveys will be aggregated into an Exclusion Risk Score (ERS) for each team. Teams with high ERS values will be flagged for immediate review and corrective action. Interventions may include leadership coaching to strengthen inclusive practices, team-building exercises to enhance identification and belonging, and structured "safe-space" discussions to rebuild psychological safety. For projects classified as highly complex, ERA will be conducted monthly rather than quarterly, ensuring closer monitoring and timely corrective action. Importantly, project managers will be required to incorporate ERA results into their standard dashboards, treating exclusion risk with the same seriousness as technical, budgetary, or operational risks.

For example, consider a software development team working on a large-scale client integration project with high complexity. The ERA survey results show that employees feel less safe expressing concerns and that team identification is low, resulting in a high Exclusion Risk Score. In response, HR initiates leadership coaching sessions for the team lead, organizes recognition-based team rituals, and introduces a rotating meeting facilitator system to ensure all voices are heard. Over the next two months, follow-up ERA surveys show improved psychological safety scores and higher identification levels, with a corresponding rise in team performance indicators. This illustrates how

ERA not only detects relational risks early but also provides targeted interventions that directly improve both inclusivity and team effectiveness.

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