

Cultivating inclusive leadership: a catalyst for enhanced organizational citizenship

Maria Cristina Zaccone and Matteo Pedrini

Abstract

Purpose – The present manuscript aims to develop and validate a theoretical model capable of explaining that organizational citizenship behavior is influenced by the extent to which employees feel valued, accepted and considered integral to the organizational fabric. To do this, the authors draw on social identity theory, according to which the level of identification of a person with a group or organization is not fixed but situational and context-dependent.

Design/methodology/approach – To validate the theoretical model, the authors surveyed the employees of eight large-scale distribution companies operating in Italy. Overall, the authors received completed data from 2,010 employees.

Findings – The authors theorize and demonstrate that the presence of an inclusive corporate climate positively influences employees' perceptions of work inclusion and that this latter, in turn, positively affects organizational citizenship behavior. Furthermore, they show that the indirect effect of an inclusive corporate climate on organizational citizenship behavior becomes stronger when inclusive leadership is promoted within an organization.

Originality/value – Overall, this paper confirms social identity theory in a novel way. Social identity theory suggests that the context can impact an employee's identification with the organization they work for, without specifying the characteristics that the context must possess. The authors' contribution reaffirms this theory by proposing that it is specifically the inclusiveness of the context that positively influences the employee's identification within the organization. By focusing on this aspect of inclusion, this research introduces a novel perspective that enriches the current discourse on OCB and underscores the importance of cultivating inclusive workplace environments. Also, the authors add theoretical nuance to previous literature by suggesting that the way top management exercises leadership over employees can amplify the strength of corporate climate influence on worker inclusion perception.

Keywords Work inclusion, Organizational citizenship behavior, Inclusive climate, Leader-employee relation

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The consensus among both management practitioners and scholars is unequivocal: for organizations to achieve success (Kumari and Thapliyal, 2017; Haass *et al.*, 2023), it is essential to have employees who not only fulfill but surpass their job requirements, embodying what is known as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). This concept, as defined by Organ (1988), refers to individual behaviors that, while discretionary and not formally rewarded, collectively contribute to the efficient functioning of the organization. These behaviors encompass actions aimed at benefiting corporate colleagues and the organization as a whole (Chang *et al.*, 2016; Worku and Debela, 2024; Raza *et al.*, 2024).

Understanding the mechanisms that enable organizations to foster OCB is crucial for enhancing their competitive edge. Despite widespread recognition of OCB's importance, there remains an ambiguity in the literature regarding the intraorganizational triggers of such behavior. Prior research has predominantly concentrated on the influence of

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employees' characteristics and perceptions on OCB. Empirical evidence suggests a strong correlation between OCB and factors such as employee personality and job satisfaction (Bourdage *et al.*, 2012; Eissa *et al.*, 2019; Imer *et al.*, 2014; Pletzer *et al.*, 2021; Worku and Debela, 2024). More recent scholarly efforts have expanded this focus to examine the impact of leadership styles on organizational citizenship behavior (Ahmad Bodla *et al.*, 2019; Khalili, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2016; Tran, 2023; Tabche *et al.*, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2024). Despite numerous studies having already investigated the drivers of OCB, no one has theorized until now that such behavior could be triggered by the context in which an employee works. Rather than focusing on personality, job satisfaction or leadership style, we contend that OCB is influenced by the extent to which employees feel valued, accepted and considered integral to the organizational fabric. Drawing on social identity theory, which posits that individual identification with a group or organization is situational and context dependent (Tajfel and Turner, 2004; Joensson, 2008), we theorize and empirically validate that an inclusive corporate climate fosters OCB by strengthening employees' identification with their organization. Moreover, we theorize and empirically validate that such effect is indirect, mediated by enhanced perceptions of workplace inclusion and further augmented by the presence of inclusive leadership.

To validate our hypotheses, we administered a questionnaire which was completed by a total of 2,010 Italian employees working in companies within the organized large-scale retail sector.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, our paper confirm social identity theory in a novel way. Social identity theory suggests that the context can impact an employee's identification with the organization they work for, without specifying the characteristics that the context must possess. Our contribution reaffirms this theory by proposing that it is specifically the inclusiveness of the context that positively influences the employee's identification within the organization. By focusing on this aspect of inclusion, our research introduces a novel perspective that enriches the current discourse on OCB and underscores the importance of cultivating inclusive workplace environments. Second, our paper extends the existing OCB literature by elucidating the mechanism through which an inclusive corporate climate can stimulate OCB. Third, our paper adds theoretical nuance to previous literature by suggesting that the way top management exercises leadership over employees can amplify the strength of corporate climate influence on worker inclusion perception.

The present paper is organized as follows: First, we theorize and develop the hypotheses. Second, we describe our population and sample, as well as the methodology adopted. Next, we illustrate the main findings. Finally, we discuss our findings and explain how they contribute to the literature.

Theoretical background

Organizational scholars, as evidenced in the extensive work by Podsakoff *et al.* (2009), have unequivocally recognized the pivotal role of OCB in augmenting overall organizational effectiveness (Worku and Debela, 2024; Raza *et al.*, 2024). OCB, as defined by Organ (1988), encapsulates individual behaviors that, though discretionary and not formally rewarded, collectively foster the efficient operation of an organization. These behaviors range from providing emotional support to colleagues (Rave *et al.*, 2023) to advocating for the organization and adhering to its norms and procedures, all contributing to seamless organizational functioning.

A critical determinant of OCB, as our research posits, is the manner in which employees are treated. This treatment, shaped by the organization's climate, plays a vital role in influencing employees' social identity, a concept rooted in the perception of belonging within a particular organizational context. Social identity, as articulated by Stets and Burke (2000), involves an individual's recognition of their membership in a social category or group. This identification process is dynamic, involving social comparison where similarities align

individuals with the in-group and differences categorize others as the out-group, as per Tajfel and Turner's seminal work (2004).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) applied social identity theory in the context of organizational identification, defining it as a psychological linkage where individuals experience a profound, self-defining connection with their organization. Edwards and Peccei (2007) further elaborated this as a deep affective and cognitive bond, blurring the lines between individual and organizational identities. This identification, influenced by the characteristics of the organizational context (Joensson, 2008), is particularly sensitive to the climate of inclusion within the organization.

An inclusive climate, as defined by Shore *et al.* (2011) and further elaborated by scholars like Nishii (2013) and Behravesch *et al.* (2021), is characterized by fair treatment, value for diversity and involvement in decision-making processes. This climate is multifaceted, encompassing fair employment practices, integration of diverse identities and inclusive decision-making processes (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Behravesch *et al.*, 2021).

The presence of such an inclusive climate, according to social identity theory, fosters intragroup cohesion (Orazani *et al.*, 2023) and positive attitudes toward in-group members (Kramer, 1991; Turner, 1978). In an organization marked by inclusivity, employees are likely to strongly identify with the organization, thereby prioritizing organizational goals over individual interests (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). This identification manifests in various forms of OCB, such as helping behaviors (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2000; Williams and Anderson, 1991; Vila-Vázquez *et al.*, 2023), sportsmanship (Organ, 1990), external promotion of the organization (Graham, 1991) and constructive suggestion-making (George and Jones, 1997).

In summary, we argue that an inclusive organizational climate not only cultivates a strong identification with the organization among its employees but also significantly bolsters their engagement in OCB, enhancing both personal fulfillment and organizational effectiveness.

Therefore, we propose the following:

H1. A positive relationship exists between an inclusive corporate climate and organizational citizenship behavior exhibited by employees.

The mechanism through which an inclusive climate fosters OCB merits detailed examination. In environments where an inclusive climate prevails, individuals are more likely to perceive themselves as integral and valued members of the organization. This perception of inclusion can significantly influence their behaviors within the workplace. For example, when individuals are regularly solicited for their opinions on organizational matters, they tend to perceive themselves as insiders (Yeh *et al.*, 2022), fostering a heightened willingness to engage in behaviors that surpass their formal job requirements. Moreover, in settings where employees can express core aspects of their identity without fear of reprisal, they are likely to feel a stronger sense of inclusion within the organizational fabric. Such perceptions may manifest in a variety of helping behaviors.

Conversely, in environments lacking fairness and inclusivity, employees may feel alienated (Haq *et al.*, 2023), leading to a decreased propensity to participate in OCB. These dynamics underscore the pivotal role of perceived inclusion in shaping employee behavior. The concept of work inclusion has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion. Pelled *et al.* (1999, p. 1014) define work inclusion as the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider within a work system. Roberson (2006, p. 217) extends this definition to encompass the removal of barriers to full participation and contribution within an organization. Similarly, Miller (1998, p. 151) conceptualizes work inclusion as the extent to which individuals are permitted and empowered to contribute fully.

In this context, work inclusion may serve as a catalyst for employees to exhibit favoritism toward the organization, engage in helping behaviors, demonstrate sportsmanship, offer constructive suggestions and perform beyond their formal job requirements. Furthermore,

work inclusion may act as a critical mechanism linking an inclusive corporate climate to enhanced OCB. In organizations characterized by such climates, employees are likely to perceive a high degree of work inclusion, which, in turn, can motivate them to contribute to the organization's functioning through discretionary and voluntary actions.

Therefore, we propose the following:

- H2.* Perception of work inclusion acts as a mediating factor in the relationship between an inclusive organizational climate and the manifestation of organizational citizenship behavior.

The impact of an inclusive corporate climate on work inclusion may vary contingent upon the leadership approach employed by top management. Role theory, a prevalent theoretical perspective in organizational studies, provides valuable insights into the dynamics of supervisor-worker relationships. This theory conceptualizes the development of leader-employee interactions as a role-making process, unfolding through a series of role episodes (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Within these episodes, leaders articulate expectations to their subordinates, with the subsequent development of the relationship contingent upon the employee's response. This interaction can evolve into either a high-quality socioemotional relationship (Wang *et al.*, 2023), characterized by mutual trust and understanding, or a more transactional relationship lacking these deeper emotional connections.

In this context, the concept of inclusive leadership emerges as particularly salient (Shore and Chung, 2022). Defined by Randel *et al.* (2018) as a leadership style that emphasizes employee integration and individuality in contributing to organizational goals, inclusive leadership is characterized by openness, approachability and psychological safety for employees to express innovative ideas. For instance, in an organizational setting where employees are not only encouraged to share their opinions but also find that their perspectives are genuinely valued by the management, they are likely to perceive themselves as integral members of the organization (Malik, 2023). This heightened perception of inclusion is likely to translate into a range of OCBs that contribute positively to organizational effectiveness.

Conversely, if employees perceive that their contributions are solicited but not genuinely considered by the management, their sense of inclusion may diminish, adversely affecting their engagement in OCB. Inclusive leadership plays a pivotal role in making employees feel a part of the organization and in shaping the organizational ethos (Shore and Chung, 2022; Malik, 2023).

Therefore, we propose that inclusive leadership can amplify the indirect effect of an inclusive work climate on OCB. When employees operate in an environment not only characterized by inclusivity but also led by managers who practice inclusive leadership, they may experience a heightened sense of work inclusion. This enhanced perception of inclusion is likely to result in a stronger commitment and favoritism toward the organization, manifesting in elevated levels of OCB. Therefore, we propose the following:

- H3.* Inclusive leadership serves as a moderating factor, influencing the strength of the indirect effect that an inclusive organizational climate has on organizational citizenship behavior.

Methodology

Research setting

To address potential biases associated with industry- and context-specific variables, this study focused on a homogeneous population of employees within the same geographical region and industry.

While most research on OCB has concentrated on North American or Anglo-Saxon contexts, exploring OCB in Italy promises to enrich global literature with a distinct perspective. This exploration contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the

factors influencing OCB across diverse cultures and economic environments. Italy was deliberately chosen as the study's geographical context due to increasing recognition of workplace inclusion, particularly among younger workforce segments (Ravazzani, 2016; Monaco and Pezzella, 2024). Moreover, Italy's lack of mandated inclusion policies offers organizations significant latitude to innovate and implement inclusion initiatives without regulatory constraints.

The large-scale distribution sector, chosen as the focus of this research, serves as an ideal setting to investigate workplace inclusion dynamics. Retail is a pivotal sector in the Italian economy, employing a substantial workforce and exerting a significant influence on daily life. In this industry, inclusive practices pose distinct challenges, evident in both administrative offices and retail outlets. The sector's diverse workforce highlights differing inclusion experiences between administrative roles and frontline retail positions (Cassell *et al.*, 2022). Frontline workers often confront more pronounced barriers to workplace inclusion, providing valuable insights for comparative analysis.

Italy's unique combination of industry characteristics and national context presents an opportune environment to explore the nuances and impacts of work inclusion strategies on organizational outcomes.

Sample and data collection

The data collection process for this study was meticulously structured and comprised several stages. Initially, the development of a robust survey instrument was undertaken. This involved creating an English version of the questionnaire, grounded in well-established psychometric measures. Adhering to the recognized practice of back-translation for linguistic accuracy and cultural relevance, the survey was translated from English to Italian and vice versa (Qian *et al.*, 2013). This translation process was executed by two bilingual raters proficient in both English and Italian, who were not participants in the study, thereby ensuring objectivity and reliability in the translation.

Further validating the linguistic precision of the survey, a preliminary pilot test was conducted with five Italian workers, who were not part of the main study sample. This pilot served to refine the clarity and comprehensibility of the survey instructions and items.

Subsequent to the instrument development, a comprehensive list of large-scale distribution companies was procured from the most prominent association representing the sector in Italy. Outreach was then made to the key account managers of each association-affiliated company, soliciting their participation, along with their employees, in completing three distinct questionnaires. Eight companies expressed interest in participating, representing a balanced mix of enterprises specializing in the distribution of both food and non-food products.

The distribution of the questionnaires was facilitated by designators – typically occupying roles as human resource directors or managers – in each company. These designators disseminated the survey to the entire employee cohort via a generic and anonymous online link, thus ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents.

In an effort to mitigate potential biases associated with common method variance, participants were explicitly instructed that there were no correct responses, and the importance of candidness was emphasized. Additionally, the survey items were crafted to be clear and precise, minimizing the possibility of misinterpretation.

Overall, the survey link was disseminated to approximately 6,800 employees within the Italian large-scale distribution sector. From this outreach, a total of 2,010 completed survey responses were received, yielding a response rate of 29.5%. This response rate, considering the scale and context of the study, provides a robust data set for subsequent analysis.

Measures

Inclusive climate. In this study, the construct of inclusive climate was operationalized using a scale developed by [Nishii \(2013\)](#). In this scale, the items have remained unchanged; only the word “unit” has been replaced with “organization”. Responses to the scale items were captured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To ascertain the internal consistency reliability of the inclusive climate scale, a Cronbach’s alpha test was conducted. The obtained Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.923 significantly surpasses the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 for acceptable reliability ([Joseph et al., 2010](#)), thereby demonstrating a high level of internal consistency for the scale. In addition to the reliability analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was employed to evaluate the appropriateness of the sample size for the factor analysis. The KMO test yielded a value of 0.945, which exceeds the generally recommended threshold in scholarly research. This high KMO score indicates that the sample size was sufficiently adequate for a robust factor analysis, thus validating the appropriateness of the sample for the empirical investigation of the inclusive climate construct. The items used to measure inclusive climate are provided in the [Appendix](#).

Work inclusion. In the present study, the construct of work inclusion was quantified using the scale developed by [Mor-Barak and Cherin \(1998\)](#). The items on this scale have remained unchanged, with the addition of the word “I” at the beginning of each item to clarify that respondents should indicate their level of agreement with each statement. To evaluate the internal consistency reliability of this scale, a Cronbach’s alpha test was conducted. The results yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.8934, exceeding the standard threshold for acceptable internal consistency, thereby indicating a robust level of reliability for the scale. In addition to assessing the internal consistency, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was implemented to ascertain the appropriateness of the sample size for conducting factor analysis. The KMO test produced a score of 0.887, which surpasses the commonly accepted threshold in academic research for adequate sampling. The items used to measure work inclusion are provided in the [Appendix](#).

Organizational citizenship behavior. The measurement of OCB was operationalized using the scale developed by [Williams and Anderson \(1991\)](#). The items on this scale have remained unchanged, with the addition of the word “I” at the beginning of each item to clarify that respondents should indicate their level of agreement with each statement. To rigorously evaluate the internal consistency reliability of the OCB scale, a Cronbach’s alpha analysis was performed. The analysis yielded a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.8078, which exceeds the commonly acknowledged benchmark for acceptable internal consistency in scholarly research. This result indicates a satisfactory level of reliability for the OCB scale. Additionally, to verify the adequacy of the sample size for the factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test was administered. The KMO test resulted in a score of 0.839, surpassing the standard threshold accepted in academic literature for sampling adequacy. The items used to measure OCB are provided in the [Appendix](#).

Inclusive leadership. We measured inclusive leadership using the scale developed by [Carmeli et al. \(2010\)](#). The items on this scale have remained unchanged, with the addition of the word “my” at the beginning of each item to clarify that respondents should indicate their level of agreement with each statement regarding their own manager. To test the internal consistency of inclusive leadership, we ran a Cronbach’s alpha test. The results revealed a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.957, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Moreover, we ran the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test to ensure sampling adequacy. The KMO score was higher than the threshold usually accepted in the literature (KMO = 0.944), indicating a high level of sampling adequacy. The items used to measure inclusive leadership are provided in the [Appendix](#).

Control variables. To mitigate potential biases arising from individual-level variables, our study incorporated controls for several key personal characteristics. First, we accounted for work experience, acknowledging that tenure within an organization may influence perceptions of inclusion and subsequent engagement in OCB. Employees with shorter tenure may experience a lower sense of inclusion compared to their longer-serving counterparts, potentially impacting their OCB (Kegans *et al.*, 2012). Second, age was controlled for, recognizing that older employees might prioritize concerns external to the workplace, such as familial responsibilities, potentially affecting their need for workplace inclusion (Mohammad *et al.*, 2010; Ng and Feldman, 2008). Third, gender was included as a control variable. Research suggests that women may demonstrate heightened sensitivity to issues of inclusion and, as a result, may exhibit more OCB than men when they perceive a higher level of workplace inclusion (Kidder, 2002). Fourth, work location was controlled for, distinguishing between employees working at administrative headquarters and those in store locations. Given the potential variation in inclusive climate and leadership across these different work settings in large-scale distribution companies, this control was deemed necessary. Finally, to account for the influence of organization-specific factors, we also controlled for firm characteristics. This consideration acknowledges that unique organizational attributes could significantly impact the phenomena under study, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between inclusive climate, leadership and OCB.

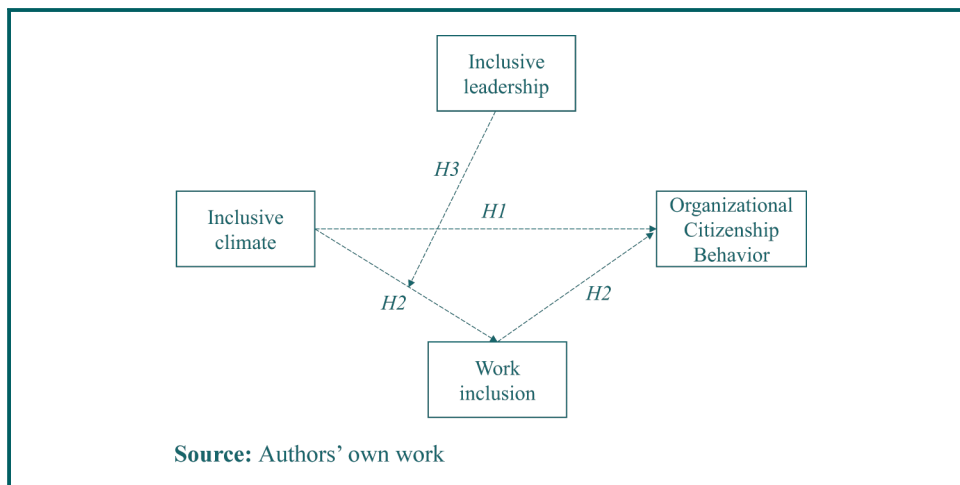
Analysis

Figure 1 delineates the conceptual framework of our moderated-mediated model. The model posits several interlinked hypotheses. First, it is hypothesized that an inclusive climate exerts a direct influence on Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). This direct relationship forms the foundational aspect of our theoretical exploration.

Second, the model hypothesizes an indirect pathway wherein the inclusive climate impacts OCB through the mediating variable of workplace inclusion. This aspect of the model seeks to uncover the nuanced mechanisms through which an inclusive climate translates into OCB.

Finally, the model proposes that the influence of inclusive leadership slack serves as a moderating variable in the indirect relationship between an inclusive climate and OCB. This

Figure 1 The conceptual model



hypothesis aims to elucidate the extent to which inclusive leadership can amplify or attenuate the mediated effect of an inclusive climate on OCB.

Initially, to empirically test hypotheses 1 and 2, we employed stepwise hierarchical regression analysis, following the methodological guidance of [Aiken et al. \(1991\)](#). However, given the limitations of hierarchical regression in testing complex interactions, particularly for hypothesis 3, this approach proved insufficient for our full analytical needs.

Consequently, to robustly examine the proposed moderated mediation relationship – the interaction between inclusive climate, workplace inclusion and inclusive leadership slack – we adopted the PROCESS analytical model developed by [Preacher et al. \(2007\)](#). This methodological shift allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the hypothesized relationships within our moderated-mediated model, enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

Results

Prior to the empirical testing of our hypotheses, a thorough evaluation was conducted to address the potential for common method bias and to confirm the internal reliability and validity of our constructs. To assess common method variance, we utilized Harman's single-factor test, a widely recognized post hoc method applied after data collection. This test is instrumental in determining whether the variance in the data can be predominantly attributed to a single factor.

Subsequent to this assessment, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted. The results, as presented in [Table 1](#), elucidate the relationships among our key variables. Notably, inclusive climate, inclusive leadership and work inclusion demonstrated significant and positive correlations with OCB. Additionally, work inclusion exhibited significant positive correlations with both inclusive climate and inclusive leadership.

The hierarchical regression results are detailed in [Table 2](#). In the initial step, the impact of an inclusive climate (X) on OCB (Y) was examined. The analysis indicated a positive and significant relationship ($\beta = 0.273, p < 0.01$), thereby confirming Hypothesis 1 according to which a positive relationship exists between an inclusive corporate climate and organizational citizenship behavior exhibited by employees. This suggests that fostering an inclusive environment within the organization correlates positively with employees' willingness to engage in behaviors that go beyond their formal job roles, benefiting the overall organizational culture and effectiveness.

The subsequent step involved assessing the influence of work inclusion (M) on OCB (Y), revealing a significant positive association ($\beta = 0.404, p < 0.01$). In the third step, the relationship between an inclusive climate (X) and work inclusion (M) was analyzed. The regression results showed a positive correlation ($\beta = 0.671, p < 0.01$). The fourth step entailed testing the mediating role of work inclusion (M) between inclusive climate (X) and OCB (Y). The regression model, including both inclusive climate and work inclusion, indicated that while the influence of the former became nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.003, p > 0.05$),

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) OCB	0.00	1.00	1.00			
(2) Inclusive climate	0.00	1.00	0.30**	1.00		
(3) Inclusive leadership	0.00	1.00	0.33**	0.70**	1.00	
(4) Work inclusion	0.00	1.00	0.40**	0.69**	0.65**	1.00

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.1$

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2 Hierarchical regression

	(1) OCB	(2) OCB	(3) Work inclusion	(4) OCB	(5) Work inclusion
Inclusive climate	0.273** (0.023)		0.671** (0.017)	0.003 (0.030)	0.479** (0.021)
Work inclusion		0.404** (0.022)		0.402** (0.030)	
Inclusive leadership					0.312** (0.023)
Inclusive climate × inclusive leadership					0.040** (0.013)
Constant	−0.178 (0.111)	−0.053 (0.106)	−0.312** (0.080)	−0.053 (0.106)	−0.303** (0.078)
Work experience	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Age	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Gender	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Work location	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Firm	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
Observations	2,010	2,010	2,010	2,010	2,010
R-square	0.114	0.189	0.535	0.189	0.575

Robust errors in parentheses

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.1$

Source: Authors' own work

the effect of work inclusion remained positive and significant ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < 0.01$). This result validates Hypothesis 2, providing evidence that the perception of work inclusion plays a crucial role as a mediating factor in the relationship between an inclusive organizational climate and the demonstration of organizational citizenship behavior by employees. This mediation effect highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive climate to enhance employee perception of work inclusion and, lately, organizational citizenship behavior.

Finally, the fifth step of our analysis focused on testing the moderating effect of inclusive leadership (W) on the relationship between inclusive climate (X) and work inclusion (M). The interaction term between inclusive climate and inclusive leadership yielded a positive and significant coefficient ($\beta = 0.040$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that inclusive leadership indeed moderates this relationship. Overall, the hierarchical regression analysis provided robust support for our hypotheses, demonstrating the intricate dynamics between inclusive climate, work inclusion, inclusive leadership and their combined impact on OCB.

Hierarchical regression analysis, while proficient in testing mediation and moderation, does not extend to the examination of moderated mediation, which forms the crux of Hypothesis 3 in our study. Acknowledging this methodological limitation, we opted to reanalyze our data utilizing the PROCESS macro for SPSS, a statistical tool specifically designed to probe the presence of moderated mediation relationships.

Initially, the analysis focused on evaluating the indirect effect of an inclusive climate on OCB mediated by workplace inclusion. As indicated in Table 3, this indirect effect was found to be positive and significant ($\beta = 0.260$, 95% CI = [0.212, 0.308]), thereby reaffirming the support for Hypothesis 2.

Furthermore, the investigation extended to assessing the conditional indirect effect of an inclusive climate on OCB through workplace inclusion, contingent upon varying levels of inclusive leadership. The analysis yielded an index of moderated mediation that was

Table 3 Bootstrapping results of mediation

Variable	Effect	SE	Confidence interval
Direct effect	0.042	0.030	[−0.017; 0.100]
Indirect effect	0.260	0.025	[0.212; 0.308]

Source: Authors' own work

statistically significant (95% CI = [0.003, 0.028]). This outcome substantiates the existence of a moderated mediation, as postulated in Hypothesis 3.

Table 4 details the conditional indirect effects at different quantiles of inclusive leadership. The analysis revealed that across all examined levels of inclusive leadership, the indirect effect remained significantly positive. This empirical evidence corroborates Hypothesis 3, indicating that the impact of an inclusive climate on OCB, as mediated by workplace inclusion, is indeed moderated by the degree of inclusive leadership present. Therefore, through empirical validation, we confirm that inclusive leadership acts as a moderating factor, influencing the magnitude of the indirect effect that an inclusive climate exerts on organizational citizenship behavior. By fostering inclusive leadership behaviors, organizations can amplify the impact of their efforts.

Robustness checks

In our study, a series of robustness tests were conducted to validate our hypotheses further. First, to reassess Hypothesis 1, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed. The fit statistics generated from the SEM analysis uniformly indicated a good model fit. Additionally, the path coefficient from inclusive climate to Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) remained positive and significant, thereby providing continued support for Hypothesis 1.

Second, to more rigorously test Hypothesis 2, we utilized the medsem command in STATA, which facilitates mediation analysis using two established methods. The first method, an adaptation of Baron and Kenny's approach by Iacobucci *et al.* (2007), integrates structural equation modeling. This approach posits that when both the paths from X to M and M to Y are significant, partial mediation is present. Complete mediation is inferred if, in addition to these conditions, Sobel's z-test is significant and the direct path from X to Y is nonsignificant. Our analysis confirmed the significance of both the X to M and M to Y paths, and Sobel's test was also significant. Moreover, the direct effect of X on Y was not significant, indicating full mediation. Thus, the results robustly support full mediation in Hypothesis 2. Further, the medsem analysis revealed a Ratio of the Indirect to Total Effect (RIT) of 0.941, suggesting that approximately 94% of the effect of inclusive climate on OCB is mediated by work inclusion. Additionally, the Ratio of the Indirect to Direct effect (RID) was calculated at 15.979, indicating that the mediated effect is approximately 16 times larger than the direct effect of inclusive climate on OCB.

Subsequently, we applied the approach proposed by Zhao *et al.* (2010). Given the significance of the Monte Carlo test and the non-significance of the X on Y coefficient, our findings align with the criteria for indirect-only mediation (full mediation), further corroborating Hypothesis 2.

Unfortunately, STATA does not offer a command specifically designed to test moderated mediation, which is pivotal for Hypothesis 3. To address this, we resorted to regular structural equation modeling. The SEM results indicated that inclusive climate positively and significantly influenced work inclusion, and the interaction term between inclusive climate and inclusive leadership was also significant and positive. Additionally, the impact of work inclusion on OCB was positive and significant, while the direct effect of inclusive climate on

Table 4 Bootstrapping results of moderated mediation

Conditional indirect effect	Effect	SE	Confidence interval
Inclusive leadership: the mean minus one SD	0.417	0.32	[0.354; 0.481]
Inclusive leadership: the mean	0.457	0.26	[0.406; 0.508]
Inclusive leadership: the mean plus one SD	0.497	0.29	[0.440; 0.554]

Source: Authors' own work

OCB was not significant. These SEM findings are congruent with our previous results, providing consistent support for the moderated mediation relationship outlined in Hypothesis 3.

Endogeneity correction

In our analysis, we acknowledged the potential for omitted variable bias and endogeneity issues, particularly those arising from reverse causality, in the relationship between inclusive corporate climate and OCB. To address these methodological concerns, we employed the instrumental variable approach, a robust statistical technique designed to correct for endogeneity.

Following the methodology outlined by [Semadeni et al. \(2014\)](#), we engaged in a careful process to identify suitable instrumental variables. These variables must satisfy two critical conditions: they should be predictive of the independent variable (inclusive climate) but not directly associated with the dependent variable (OCB).

After evaluating various potential instrumental variables, we identified “work location” as a suitable instrument. The rationale behind this choice is that employees working at the administrative headquarters may perceive a more inclusive climate compared to those working in store locations, due to the different work environment and organizational policies. However, the work location itself, particularly being in the administrative headquarters, should not inherently influence OCB.

In our empirical analysis, we found that work location was significantly related to the perception of an inclusive climate, yet it did not exhibit a significant direct relationship with OCB, thereby satisfying the criteria for an appropriate instrumental variable.

To further scrutinize the relevance and exogeneity of this instrument, we applied the `ivregress` command in STATA, which facilitates instrumental variables regression through a two-stage least squares (2SLS) estimation approach, as recommended by [Semadeni et al. \(2014\)](#). Interestingly, the results of this analysis indicated that inclusive climate did not act as an endogenous regressor in our model. This finding suggests that concerns regarding endogeneity, in this case, might be less pronounced than initially anticipated, thereby bolstering the validity of our inferences regarding the impact of an inclusive climate on OCB.

Discussion

Corporate leaders are increasingly recognizing the importance of fostering OCB, which encompasses voluntary and discretionary actions within their organizations. Examples of OCB include employees taking on additional responsibilities, inspiring colleagues to do the same and demonstrating exceptional enthusiasm and effort in their roles. In this study, we aimed to delve deeper into the explanatory variables and mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. The following sections will outline the theoretical and practical contributions derived from our research in this domain.

Theoretical contributions

According to social identity theory, the organizational context can significantly impact an employee’s identification with the organization, which in turn influences various aspects of their behavior, including OCB. However, social identity theory does not specify the exact features that the context must possess to foster such identification. Our manuscript makes a contribution to this body of knowledge by pinpointing one specific contextual characteristic that plays a crucial role: inclusiveness. We propose that the inclusiveness of the organizational context is a key factor that positively influences OCB. This theoretical contribution extends the existing body of research on OCB antecedents

(Chang *et al.*, 2016; Mousa *et al.*, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2023; Worku and Debela, 2024), which has predominantly identified personality and job satisfaction as key factors influencing OCB. Our research bridges this gap by theorizing and empirically validating that inclusion within organizations influences employees' willingness to exceed their formal job requirements. The novelty of our study lies in our development of a theoretical model that identifies employees' perception of inclusion in their work environment as the primary antecedent of organizational citizenship behavior. By emphasizing this aspect of inclusion, our study offers a fresh perspective that contributes to ongoing discussions on OCB and underscores the significance of fostering inclusive workplace cultures.

Second, our study delves into the intricacies of the intraorganizational dynamics. We demonstrate that an inclusive climate positively impacts OCB through the mechanism of work inclusion, providing empirical support for this relationship. This positive impact occurs through the mechanism of work inclusion, where employees feel valued, respected and integral to the organization.

Third, we contribute to the discourse on leader-employee interactions (Malik, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2024) and their effects on organizational outcomes. Existing literature, often anchored in leader-member exchange theory, suggests that leaders form distinct relationships with subordinates, ranging from high-quality socioemotional to low-quality transactional interactions. Our research adds theoretical depth to this perspective by proposing that the manner in which top management exercises leadership can intensify the influence of corporate climate on workers' perceptions of inclusion. Specifically, we illustrate that when workers are part of an inclusive environment and also engage with supervisors who practice inclusive leadership, they exhibit a heightened sense of work inclusion. This enhanced perception translates into discretionary and voluntary actions that bolster the overall functioning of the organization.

Finally, our study makes a significant contribution to the literature on workplace inclusion (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). Responding to Shore and colleagues' (2011) call for more empirical research on the effects of inclusion on workers, our study bridges a critical gap in this domain. While the existing empirical evidence primarily links inclusion to job satisfaction (Acquavita *et al.*, 2009; Randel, 2023) and highlights exclusion from decision-making as a predictor of turnover intentions (Findler *et al.*, 2005; Mor Barak, 2000; Batool and Kashif, 2023), our research offers a broader perspective. We not only confirm the positive impacts of inclusion but also explore the contextual factors that can enhance or mitigate these effects. Consistent with Shore *et al.*'s (2011) assertion about the significance of supervisor support in implementing inclusive practices, our findings underscore that inclusive leadership plays a pivotal role in strengthening the relationship between an inclusive climate and work inclusion, thereby adding a nuanced understanding to the discourse on workplace inclusion.

Practical contributions

This manuscript illuminates the potential benefits inherent in cultivating an inclusive workplace, drawing attention to the consequential relationship between employees' perception of an inclusive climate and their engagement in OCB. Such recognition provides a practical implication valuable to HR managers and CEOs alike.

Our findings suggest that the establishment of an inclusive corporate climate is a critical strategic opportunity for CEOs and HR managers. Such an environment not only fosters OCB among employees but also contributes to the broader spectrum of corporate success. Fostering an inclusive organizational climate entail creating an environment where all employees feel valued, respected and able to contribute their unique perspectives. This can be achieved through initiatives aimed at ensuring equal opportunities for all employees, including in hiring, promotions and access to resources and training.

Moreover, our research highlights a nuanced aspect of this relationship: the amplifying effect of inclusive leadership. The presence of an inclusive corporate climate significantly impacts employees' perceptions of work inclusion, and this effect is markedly intensified when coupled with inclusive leadership practices. This revelation presents a secondary, yet equally vital, opportunity for organizations. By investing in the development and implementation of inclusive leadership styles, particularly among those in top management positions, companies can further bolster the positive impact of an inclusive climate. This includes seeking and valuing input from diverse voices, providing equal opportunities for growth and development, and advocating for fairness and equity within decision-making processes. This approach ensures a more profound and resonant experience of inclusion among employees, thereby reinforcing the beneficial outcomes associated with an inclusive workplace.

Our study advocates for a dual focus in organizational strategy: the promotion of an inclusive climate and the adoption of inclusive leadership practices. Together, these initiatives have the potential to significantly enhance employee perceptions of inclusion, drive OCB and, by extension, foster overall corporate success.

Limitations and future research

This study, while yielding insightful findings, is subject to certain limitations that warrant consideration. First, the scope of this research was geographically confined to Italian companies, thereby not accounting for the potential variability of these findings in different international contexts. Future research should endeavor to validate whether the observed relationships between inclusive climate, work inclusion and OCB extend beyond the Italian context. A cross-national comparative analysis, particularly focusing on the impact of diverse institutional features on intraorganizational dynamics related to work inclusion, would significantly enrich our understanding of these phenomena in various global settings.

Second, the research was limited to large-scale distribution companies, thus not encompassing other industries. Future studies could engage in a cross-industry comparative analysis to ascertain whether the influence of work inclusion on OCB is consistent across different sectors.

Third, while numerous control variables were incorporated in our empirical models, there may be additional individual-level specificities that were not accounted for. The inclination of employees to engage in certain behaviors, as suggested by [Bettencourt et al. \(2001\)](#), [Organ \(1994\)](#) and [Penner et al. \(1997\)](#), could be influenced by their personalities. Therefore, future research should consider these individual-level traits to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of OCB.

Moreover, there is a burgeoning need to explore the boundary conditions within the leader-employee relationship and how these may modulate the effects of an inclusive corporate climate on OCB. An intriguing avenue for future research would be to examine the interaction between different leadership styles at the corporate apex (such as democratic, autocratic and *laissez-faire*) and their impact on the relationship between an inclusive climate and OCB.

Finally, it is important to note that our study did not directly measure the actual OCB of employees, but rather their behavioral attitudes. Recognizing that attitudes may not fully capture real employee behaviors, future research should employ sophisticated experimental methodologies to more accurately assess the causal links between employee perceptions and their actual behaviors.

Despite these limitations, we believe the findings of this study provide valuable insights and are applicable to other large firms, offering a foundation for further exploration.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of workplace inclusion in shaping employee behavior, contributing to a deeper understanding of organizational dynamics. We theorize and empirically demonstrate that when employees perceive their work environment as inclusive, they are likely to reciprocate with discretionary and voluntary actions that enhance the overall functionality of the organization.

Furthermore, our research extends beyond the implications of an inclusive climate. We provide robust evidence indicating that the effect of an inclusive climate on OCB, as mediated by work inclusion, is subject to moderation by inclusive leadership. This moderating role of inclusive leadership highlights the complexity of the relationship between organizational climate, leadership styles and employee behavior.

Our findings offer valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners, emphasizing the necessity of fostering an inclusive work culture complemented by inclusive leadership to optimize organizational effectiveness and employee engagement.

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Appendix

The following items were used to measure Inclusive Climate, Inclusive Leadership, Work Inclusion and Organizational Citizenship Behavior.

Likert scale used to measure Inclusive Climate ([Nishii, 2013](#)).

- My organization is committed to having diverse employees well-distributed throughout the organization.
- The employment/HR practices of this organization are fairly implemented.
- This organization has a fair promotion process.
- The performance review process is fair in this organization.
- In this organization, the unique needs of employees are met by flexible benefit programs.
- This organization invests in the development of all of its employees.
- Employees in this organization receive "equal pay for equal work."
- This organization provides safe ways for employees to voice their grievances.
- People in this organization can count on receiving a fair performance review.
- In this organization, employees are comfortable being themselves.
- This organization is characterized by a non-threatening environment in which people can reveal their "true" selves.

- Promoting diversity awareness is a priority of this organization.
- This organization values work-life balance.
- In this organization, people's differences are respected.
- Employees in this organization are actively encouraged to take advantage of work-life balance programs.
- This organization commits resources to ensuring that employees are able to resolve conflicts effectively.
- Employees of this organization are valued for who they are as people, not just for the jobs that they fill.
- In this organization, people often share and learn about one another as people.
- This organization has a culture in which employees appreciate the differences that people bring to the workplace.
- Intergroup relations (i.e. between different races, workgroups, age groups, etc.) tend to be characterized by respect and trust within this organization.
- In this organization, employee input is actively sought.
- It is clear that this organization perceives employee input as a key to its success.
- Employees in this organization are empowered to make work-related decisions on their own.
- In this organization, people's ideas are judged based on their quality, and not based on who expresses them.
- This organization has a climate for healthy debate.
- In this organization, everyone's ideas for how to do things better are given serious consideration.
- Employees in this organization are encouraged to offer ideas on how to improve operations outside of their own areas.
- In this organization, employees' insights are used to rethink or redefine work practices.
- Top management exercises the belief that problem-solving is improved when input from different roles, ranks and functions is considered.
- Employees in this organization engage in productive debates in an effort to improve decision-making.
- This is an organization in which employees make use of their own knowledge to enhance their work.

Likert scale used to measure Work Inclusion ([Mor-Barak and Cherin, 1998](#)):

- I feel part of informal discussion in work group.
- I feel isolated from work group (R).
- My work group members don't share information with me (R).
- People in work group listen to what I say.
- My judgment is respected by members of work group.
- My work group members make me feel a part of decisions.
- I am able to influence organizational decisions.
- I am able to influence work assignment decisions.
- I am consulted about important project decisions.
- I have a say in the way work is performed.
- I get feedback from my boss.
- I don't have access to the training I need (R).
- I have all the materials I need to do my job.
- I rarely receive input from my supervisor (R).

Likert scale used to measure Organizational Citizenship Behavior ([Williams and Anderson, 1991](#)):

- I help others who have been absent.
- I help others who have heavy work loads.
- I assist supervisor with his/her work when not asked.
- I take time to listen to co-workers' problems and worries.
- I go out of way to help new employees.
- I take a personal interest in other employees.
- I pass along information to co-workers.
- For me attendance at work is above the norm.
- I give advance notice when unable to come to work.
- I take undeserved work breaks (R).
- I spend a lot of time in personal phone conversations (R).
- I complain about insignificant things at work (R).
- I conserve and protect organizational property.
- I adhere to informal rules devised to maintain order.

Likert scale used to measure Inclusive Leadership ([Carmeli et al., 2010](#)):

- My manager is open to hearing new ideas.
- My manager is attentive to new opportunities to improve work processes.
- My manager is open to discuss the desired goals and new ways to achieve them.
- My manager is available for consultation on problems.
- My manager is an ongoing 'presence' in this team-someone who is readily available.
- My manager is available for professional questions I would like to consult with him/her.
- My manager is ready to listen to my requests.
- My manager encourages me to access him/her on emerging issues.
- My manager is accessible for discussing emerging problems.

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