

The Effect of Inclusive Leadership on Employee Performance Mediated through Innovative Behavior and Work Engagement

Mediating Effect of Innovative Behavior and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In today's dynamic public sector, fostering effective leadership is crucial to improving employee performance and organizational outcomes. This study aims to investigate the effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance by integrating innovative behavior and work engagement as mediating variables in a public sector setting. A quantitative approach with an explanatory research design was employed. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 120 employees of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, selected using purposive sampling. The analysis was conducted using the SEM-PLS method. The results indicate that inclusive leadership has a positive and significant influence on innovative behavior, work engagement, and employee performance. Furthermore, innovative behavior and work engagement also show positive and significant effects on employee performance. Mediation testing confirms that both innovative behavior and work engagement serve as important mediators in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership becomes more effective in enhancing employee performance when supported by employees' psychological engagement and innovative actions. This study contributes to the development of inclusive leadership theory and offers practical implications for human resource management practices within public sector organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of the organizational environment in the era of disruption requires every institution to adapt rapidly to changes in its surroundings. This condition positions Human Resources (HR) as a strategic factor that determines organizational success and sustainability. Organizational competitive advantage is no longer driven only by physical assets or technology, but by the organization's ability to effectively manage its employees. Employees with high performance contribute directly to increased productivity and achieving organizational goals in a sustainable manner (Supriyadi et al., 2020; Anakpo et al., 2023).

Employee performance is an indicator of organizational success because it reflects employees' work outcomes, which are influenced by their abilities, motivation, and individual perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. Optimal performance is not determined solely by how hard employees work, but also by the extent to which they understand their tasks, feel supported, and have opportunities to contribute meaningfully (Umala, 2017). In the context of modern organizations, improving employee performance requires managerial approaches that are more humanistic, participatory, and inclusive.

Inclusive leadership has emerged as one of the leadership styles receiving growing attention in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM). It refers to a leadership approach that emphasizes openness, fairness, appreciation of diversity, and the creation

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of a strong sense of belonging among employees (Carmeli et al., 2010; Rawat et al., 2021). Rather than focusing solely on achieving performance outcomes, inclusive leaders foster a psychologically safe workplace where individuals feel respected, supported, and able to express their ideas, ultimately enhancing employee engagement and overall performance.

In practice, inclusive leadership is becoming increasingly relevant for public sector organizations that face task complexity, accountability demands, and a diversity of employee backgrounds. The Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, as a public institution engaged in religious services and education, is confronted with the challenge of improving service quality amid the dynamic needs of society. Employee involvement in work processes and decision-making has become a crucial issue, considering that employees are the main actors in the implementation of public policies. Low levels of employee involvement and a weak sense of belonging may lead to apathetic attitudes toward organizational programs and negatively affect performance (Mohsen & Sharif, 2020; Guinot et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of inclusive leadership is often associated with two critical processes: work engagement and inventive behavior. Innovative behavior describes employees' efforts to create, champion, and apply new ideas that contribute to organizational improvement (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Through the promotion of transparency and psychological safety, inclusive leaders encourage staff members to try new things, share their ideas, and actively participate in improving work procedures. In this sense, creative conduct could serve as a crucial channel for inclusive leadership to encourage improved worker performance.

Another important psychological factor that is thought to influence performance is work engagement. Vigor, devotion, and a significant level of absorption in job activities are characteristics of this pleasant work-related state (Schaufeli et al., 2006). High-engagement workers are more likely to exhibit zeal, tenacity, and focus, all of which help them produce more reliable and efficient performance results. It is anticipated that inclusive leadership will boost workers' work engagement through ongoing encouragement, gratitude, and acknowledgment, which will ultimately lead to better worker performance.

Several studies have documented that inclusive leadership has a positive and significant influence on employee performance (Qi et al., 2019; Umrani et al., 2024). However, other research reports weaker, insignificant, or even negative relationships (Purnamaningtyas & Rahardja, 2021). These mixed results indicate that although inclusive leadership has been widely investigated, empirical evidence regarding its impact on employee performance remains inconclusive. In addition, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on direct effects, offering limited attention to the psychological and behavioral processes through which inclusive leadership may shape performance outcomes. Innovative behavior and work engagement have often been explored independently, and studies that incorporate both mechanisms simultaneously within an integrated framework are still scarce.

In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to empirically analyze the influence of inclusive leadership on employee performance by incorporating innovative behavior and work engagement as mediating variables. This research is expected to extend the HRM literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social pathways that underpin inclusive leadership effectiveness, while also offering practical insights for improving human resource management practices in the public sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW & HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Factors Influencing Employee Performance

Employees feel appreciated and supported when inclusive leadership creates an environment that values variety, respects individual differences, and welcomes fresh ideas. This, in turn, motivates them to try new things and innovate. As a result, inclusive leadership is essential for encouraging creative behavior from staff members, which is

essential for the advancement and success of the company. Leaders who effectively adopt an inclusive leadership style enhance employees' innovative behavior. Empirical evidence supports this, as studies by Aboramadan et al. (2022), Sürücü et al. (2023), Zhang and Zhao (2024), Khan et al. (2025), and Asghar et al. (2025) show that inclusive leadership positively influences innovative behavior.

Inclusive leadership, characterized by leaders' openness, accessibility, and responsiveness, also fosters strong supervisor-subordinate relationships, cultivating appreciation and support at work. Such an environment makes employees feel recognized and integral to the team, motivating higher levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption in their work (Vakira et al., 2023). Accordingly, leaders who adopt inclusive leadership significantly enhance employees' work engagement. Supporting evidence includes studies by Bao et al. (2022), Jaleel and Sarmad (2024), Nguyen and Tsang (2024), Hong and Zainal (2024), Wu et al. (2025), and Azila-Gbettor et al. (2025), all showing that inclusive leadership positively affects work engagement.

Finally, inclusive leadership contributes to employee performance by creating a supportive environment where contributions are valued, psychological safety is provided, and employees feel inspired to excel. This approach not only strengthens work engagement and satisfaction but also drives better performance toward organizational goals (Umrani et al., 2024). Studies by Xiaotao et al. (2018), Srimulyani et al. (2023), Huang et al. (2024), Hong and Zainal (2024), and Umrani et al. (2024) confirm that inclusive leadership positively affects employee performance.

H1: Inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on innovative behavior.

H2: Inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on work engagement.

H3: Inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on employee performance.

The Effect of Innovative Behavior and Work Engagement on Employee Performance

Innovative behavior, which includes opportunity exploration, idea generation, and idea implementation, contributes significantly to performance improvement by motivating employees to develop new ways to address academic and operational challenges. This behavior strengthens adaptability to changes in education and technology, thereby supporting the achievement of long-term objectives and overall performance improvement (Kim & Koo, 2017). Accordingly, higher levels of innovative behavior lead to better employee performance. Studies by Deng et al. (2022), Vuong et al. (2023), Babu et al. (2024), Ghlichlee and Larijani (2024), and Madaan et al. (2024) demonstrate that innovative behavior influences employee performance. Similar results are also found in studies by Nguyen and Tsang (2024) and Wang and Zhang (2025), which show that innovative behavior significantly and positively affects employee performance.

Positive psychological traits such as vigor, which manifests as high energy and mental resilience; devotion, which manifests as excitement, a feeling of purpose, and challenge; and absorption, which manifests as intense focus and complete immersion in work, are all indicators of work engagement. Generally speaking, highly engaged workers are more fervent, internally driven, and devoted to the company. This condition leads to better employee performance, which is characterized by both extra-role activities outside of official job tasks, such as helping coworkers and contributing more to the company, and task completion in accordance with set standards. High levels of work engagement boost workers' enthusiasm, dedication, and focus, which improves both the caliber and volume of their work and promotes other work-related behaviors like collaboration and creativity (Al Badi et al., 2023). Accordingly, the higher the level of work engagement, the higher the employee performance. Studies conducted by Wang and Chen (2020), Sarwar et al. (2022), Naqshbandi et al. (2024), Kissi et al. (2024), Hong and Zainal (2024), and Bhat et al. (2024) indicate that work engagement influences employee performance. Similar findings by Aftab et al. (2024) show that work engagement significantly and positively affects employee performance.

H4: Innovative behavior has a positive and significant effect on employee performance.
H5: Work engagement has a positive and significant effect on employee performance.

The Mediating Effect of Innovative Behavior and Work Engagement

Inclusive leadership creates a work climate characterized by openness and support, allowing employees to feel psychologically secure when sharing new ideas. This psychological safety encourages greater innovative behavior among employees. As employees become more innovative, they are more likely to act proactively and contribute more effectively, which in turn enhances their performance. Therefore, innovative behavior functions as an important pathway connecting inclusive leadership with improved employee outcomes. Purnamaningtyas and Rahardja's (2021) and Faadhilah et al.'s (2025) empirical data also suggest that innovative conduct mediates the association between inclusive leadership and worker performance.

Through psychological safety, acknowledgment, and increased possibilities for contribution, inclusive leadership, which encourages transparency, support, and an appreciation of diversity, can improve workers' job satisfaction. By encouraging employees' enthusiasm, concentration, and energy to give their best performance on both in-role tasks and extra-role contributions, work engagement directly leads to enhanced employee performance. Work engagement serves as a mediator, explaining how inclusive leadership can have an indirect impact on worker performance by fostering an inspiring atmosphere that motivates workers to be more involved and effective. According to research by Hong and Zainal (2024) and Boutmaghzoute et al. (2025), the relationship between inclusive conduct and employee performance is mediated by job engagement.

H6: Innovative behavior mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance.

H7: Work engagement mediates the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance.

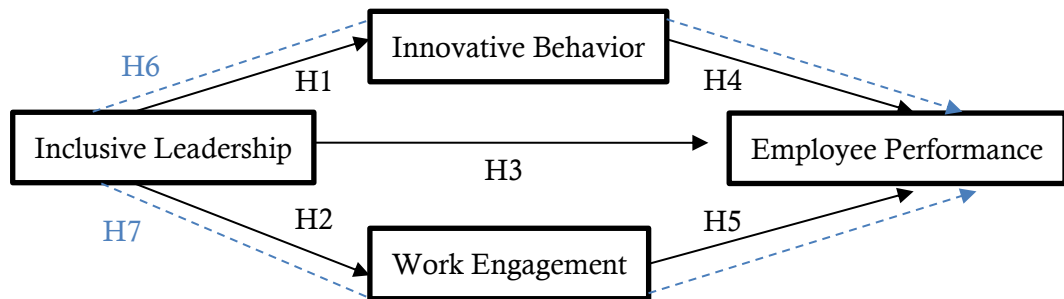


Figure 1. Research Framework

As illustrated in Figure 1, the research framework is developed to investigate how inclusive leadership affects employees' innovative behavior, work engagement, and employee performance through both direct and indirect relationships. In line with the proposed hypotheses, IL is predicted to exert a positive and significant impact on IB (H1), WE (H2), and EP (H3). In addition, IB and WE are expected to contribute to EP (H4 and H5) positively and to function as mediating mechanisms through which IL enhances employee performance (H6 and H7). This framework captures the interconnected direct and indirect effects, emphasizing the central role of inclusive leadership in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors that ultimately support higher organizational performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to investigate the causal linkages between inclusive leadership and employee performance, this study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design.

Innovative behavior and work engagement are used as mediating factors. The quantitative technique is selected because it offers empirical information about the direction and strength of correlations among variables in the study model and allows objective hypothesis testing through statistical analysis. This study is conducted in the context of a public sector organization, namely the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, which is characterized by bureaucratic structures, diverse employee backgrounds, and high demands for public service performance.

All employees of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Regional Office in the Special Region of Yogyakarta make up the study's population. Respondents must be current employees who have been employed for at least a year in order to be eligible for the purposive sample technique. This criterion was put in place to make sure that responders had enough knowledge and expertise with the leadership philosophies, workplace dynamics, and organizational performance requirements of their supervisors. A total of 120 respondents were chosen based on these criteria, satisfying the SEM-PLS minimum sample size requirements.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed both face-to-face and online. The instrument was developed by adapting measurement scales that have been extensively applied and validated in prior research. Inclusive leadership was assessed using indicators related to openness, leader availability, and accessibility (Carmeli et al., 2010). Items measuring employees' ability to come up with, support, and execute new ideas were used to gauge innovative behavior (Janssen, 2000). The aspects of vigor, devotion, and absorption were used to assess work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Employee perceptions of work standards and the efficacy of their results were used to measure employee performance (Elding, 2005). A five-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," was used to score each item.

The data were analyzed using SEM-PLS with the support of SmartPLS software. This approach was selected because it is suitable for testing complex structural frameworks involving both direct and indirect relationships and does not impose strict assumptions regarding data normality. The analysis process involved assessing the measurement model by examining convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. Subsequently, the structural model was evaluated to determine the direct influence of inclusive leadership on employee performance, as well as the indirect effects through innovative behavior and work engagement. Hypotheses were tested using a bootstrapping procedure to generate path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values, which served as the basis for drawing research conclusions.

RESULTS

The findings of the data analysis carried out to look at the connections between the study's independent, mediating, and dependent variables are shown in this section. Tests of the measurement tools' validity and reliability, the structural model's explanatory power, effect sizes, and the direct and indirect links between the constructs are all part of the analysis. The findings serve as the foundation for analyzing the impact of inclusive leadership on innovative behavior, work engagement, and employee performance by offering a thorough summary of the measurement quality and the proposed correlations.

Table 1. Validity and Reliability Test

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Cronbach's Alpha
Inclusive Leadership (IL)	0.630	0.915	0.914
Innovative Behavior (IB)	0.609	0.923	0.921
Work Engagement (WE)	0.615	0.908	0.907
Employee Performance (EP)	0.594	0.854	0.853

Table 1 summarizes the outcomes of the validity and reliability assessments for the research constructs. The findings indicate that all variables meet the required validity criteria, as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values fall between 0.594 and 0.630,

which are above the recommended minimum of 0.50. In addition, the constructs demonstrate strong reliability, reflected by Composite Reliability (ρ_a) values ranging from 0.854 to 0.923 and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients between 0.853 and 0.921, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. These results confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study are both valid and reliable.

Table 2. R-Square Test

Variable	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Innovative Behavior	0.892	0.888
Employee Performance	0.864	0.863
Work Engagement	0.863	0.862

Table 2 indicates strong explanatory power across the model. IL explains 89.2% of the variance in IB ($R^2 = 0.892$), 86.4% of EP ($R^2 = 0.864$), and 86.3% of WE ($R^2 = 0.863$), with the remaining variance in each construct accounted for by factors outside the model. The structural model demonstrates very strong explanatory capability for the dependent variables.

Table 3. F-Square Test

Variable	F-Square
Innovative Behavior-> Employee Performance	0.033
Inclusive Leadership-> Employee Performance	0.024
Inclusive Leadership-> Innovative Behavior	0.352
Inclusive Leadership-> Work Engagement	0.284
Work Engagement-> Employee Performance	0.043

Based on the F-square test results in Table 3, the effect of IL on IB ($f^2 = 0.352$) and WE ($f^2 = 0.284$) falls into the moderate category, indicating that IL makes a substantial contribution to explaining variations in IB and WE. Meanwhile, the effects of IB ($f^2 = 0.033$) and WE ($f^2 = 0.043$) on EP are categorized as small, as is the direct effect of IL on EP ($f^2 = 0.024$). These findings suggest that IL plays a stronger role in shaping employees' psychological and behavioral mechanisms (IB and WE) than in directly influencing performance, thereby supporting the mediating roles of IB and WE in the research model.

Table 4. Direct Effect Test

Variable	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	t-statistics	p-values
Inclusive Leadership → Innovative Behavior	0.930	0.924	0.034	2.424	0.000
Inclusive Leadership → Work Engagement	0.929	0.924	0.030	3.622	0.000
Inclusive Leadership → Employee Performance	0.158	0.157	0.079	2.012	0.044
Innovative Behavior → Employee Performance	0.224	0.223	0.114	1.965	0.050
Work Engagement → Employee Performance	0.223	0.219	0.105	2.136	0.033

Based on the results shown in Table 4, the path coefficient analysis reveals that inclusive leadership has a strong positive and significant influence on innovative behavior. The original sample value for this relationship is 0.930, with a t-statistic of 2.424, exceeding the critical value of 1.96, and a p-value of 0.000. This indicates that higher levels of inclusive leadership are associated with greater innovative behavior among employees. Similarly, inclusive leadership also demonstrates a positive and significant effect on work engagement, as reflected by an original sample value of 0.929 and a t-statistic of 3.622, which is well above 1.96, with a p-value of 0.000. These findings suggest that strengthening inclusive leadership contributes to increased employee engagement at work.

In addition, inclusive leadership shows a direct positive effect on employee performance, although the magnitude is comparatively modest. The original sample value is 0.158, supported by a t-statistic of 2.012 and a p-value of 0.044, indicating significance at the 5% level. Furthermore, innovative behavior also has a positive and significant relationship with employee performance, with an original sample value of 0.224, a t-statistic of 1.965, and a p-value of 0.050, which lies at the threshold of significance. This suggests that employees who display stronger innovative behavior tend to achieve better performance outcomes. Lastly, work engagement is found to positively and significantly affect employee performance, with an original sample value of 0.223, a t-statistic of 2.136, and a p-value of 0.033. This result confirms that higher levels of work engagement contribute to improved employee performance.

Table 5. Indirect Effect Test

Variable	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	t-statistics	p-values
Inclusive Leadership → Innovative Behavior → Employee Performance	0.208	0.206	0.105	1.982	0.048
Inclusive Leadership → Work Engagement → Employee Performance	0.208	0.203	0.097	2.143	0.032

Referring to Table 5, the indirect effect analysis demonstrates that inclusive leadership influences employee performance indirectly through innovative behavior. This relationship is supported by an original sample value of 0.208, a t-statistic of 1.982, which exceeds the critical value of 1.96, and a p-value of 0.048. These results confirm that innovative behavior serves as a positive and significant mediator in the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee performance. In other words, stronger inclusive leadership can improve employee performance by fostering higher levels of innovative behavior.

Moreover, the findings also reveal a significant indirect effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance through work engagement. This is indicated by an original sample value of 0.208, a t-statistic of 2.143, and a p-value of 0.032, all of which meet the significance criteria. This suggests that work engagement also plays an important mediating role, meaning that higher levels of inclusive leadership enhance employees' engagement, which subsequently contributes to better performance outcomes. These results indicate that inclusive leadership affects employee performance not only directly, but also indirectly through the mediating mechanisms of innovative behavior and work engagement.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis testing shows that inclusive leadership positively and significantly influences innovative behavior, supporting H1. This suggests that leadership characterized by openness, fairness, and respect for individuality encourages employees to explore opportunities, generate ideas, and implement innovations. These findings align with Aboramadan et al. (2022), Sürücü et al. (2023), Zhang and Zhao (2024), Khan et al. (2025), and Akgerman et al. (2024), all of whom report a positive relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative behavior.

In addition, the findings also demonstrate that inclusive leadership has a positive and significant effect on work engagement. Leaders who provide openness, support, and recognition are able to strengthen employees' emotional and cognitive attachment to their roles, thereby fostering greater enthusiasm and commitment toward their work. These results are supported by previous research conducted by Asghar et al. (2023), Jaleel and Sarmad (2024), and Wu et al. (2025), which similarly confirm the significant impact of inclusive leadership on work engagement. Moreover, the findings reinforce the conclusions of Bao et al. (2022) and Azila-Gbettor et al. (2025), who found that inclusive

leadership positively enhances employees' engagement levels within organizational settings.

The results of the hypothesis test show that inclusive leadership significantly and favorably affects worker performance. This implies that employee performance, as measured by job effectiveness and the attainment of set performance standards, increases with the degree of inclusivity of leadership methods used within an organization. This finding is in accordance with previous studies by Xiaotao et al. (2018) and Huang et al. (2024), which highlight the important role of inclusive leadership in enhancing employee outcomes. Moreover, the results also reinforce the empirical evidence provided by Srimulyani et al. (2023) and Boutmaghzoute et al. (2025), confirming that inclusive leadership contributes positively and significantly to employee performance.

Additionally, the results show that innovative behavior significantly and favorably affects employee performance. To put it another way, workers who exhibit more creative behavior typically provide superior performance results. This result is consistent with prior research conducted by Deng et al. (2022), Babu et al. (2024), Ghlichlee and Larijani (2024), and Madaan et al. (2024), all of which report that innovative behavior is a key determinant of employee performance. In addition, the present study supports the findings of Vuong et al. (2023), Nguyen and Tsang (2024), and Wang and Zhang (2025), which similarly identify a positive and significant relationship between innovative behavior and performance.

The hypothesis testing demonstrates that employee performance is positively and significantly impacted by work engagement. This suggests that workers are more likely to perform well in their positions if they are more engaged. Highly engaged employees typically demonstrate stronger energy, focus, and commitment in carrying out their responsibilities, which leads to improved performance outcomes. These findings align with those of Naqshbandi et al. (2024), Kissi et al. (2024), and Bhat et al. (2024). Additionally, the results further support studies by Al Badi et al. (2023) and Aftab et al. (2024), which emphasize that work engagement significantly enhances employee performance. Inclusive leadership creates a friendly and psychologically safe work environment, encouraging employees to share ideas, take initiative, and engage more deeply in their work.

Purnamaningtyas and Rahardja (2021) support that innovative behavior mediates the effect of inclusive leadership on performance (H6), while Hong and Zainal (2024) and Boutmaghzoute et al. (2025) confirm that work engagement also serves as a mediator (H7). Inclusive leadership enhances employee performance both directly and indirectly through the combined effects of innovative behavior and engagement. These findings reinforce the notion that inclusive leadership functions as a strategic organizational lever, fostering an environment where employees' creativity and engagement mutually enhance performance. Organizations should implement inclusive leadership practices to cultivate innovation and engagement, thereby driving sustainable improvements in employee outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that inclusive leadership holds a strategic function in improving employee performance, both through its direct influence and through indirect pathways involving innovative behavior and work engagement. The results demonstrate that inclusive leadership exerts a positive and significant impact on employees' innovative behavior as well as their level of work engagement, which in turn contributes to enhanced performance outcomes. Although the direct effect of inclusive leadership on employee performance appears to be smaller compared to its indirect effects, this suggests that the leadership approach becomes more effective when supported by psychological processes and work-related behavioral mechanisms. Consequently, innovative behavior and work engagement are confirmed as key mediating factors that help explain how inclusive leadership strengthens employee performance, particularly within public sector organizational settings.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study applies a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to observe changes in employee behavior and performance over time. Second, the use of self-administered questionnaires may introduce bias due to respondents' subjective perceptions. Third, the research is confined to a single public sector institution, which may restrict the broader applicability of the findings across different organizational environments. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, extend the investigation across diverse sectors and organizational contexts, and include additional contextual variables such as organizational culture, psychological climate, or alternative leadership styles in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which employee performance can be enhanced.

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