AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: THE INTERVENING ROLE OF WORKPLACE INCLUSION

Luxmi Malodia
Professor, University Business School
Panjab University, Chandigarh
E-mail: luxmimalodia@yahoo.com

Indu Goyal
Research Scholar, University Business School
Panjab University, Chandigarh
E-mail: indugoyal26@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Leaders has the ability to motivate employees to get work done from them efficiently. One such effective style of leadership that influences followers' behavior and produces a variety of beneficial organizational consequences is authentic leadership. In light of this, the primary objective of this paper is to study the contribution of authentic leadership to raising employee engagement via mediating effect of workplace inclusion. Data from 227 employees is gathered for this study's purpose using snowball sampling. Additionally, regression analysis is done to look at the role that workplace inclusion played in mediating the link between authentic leadership and employee engagement. According to the study's findings, workplace inclusion partially mediates the relationship of authentic leadership and employee engagement. So, in addition to addressing a gap in the past literature with regard to limited research on the association of variables under study, ramifications have been noted from a managerial standpoint. This shows that managers should concentrate on measures to increase workplace inclusion and employee engagement because doing so will be good for the company and the employees.

Keywords: Authentic Leadership, Employee Engagement, Workplace Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Engaging employees at the workplace is a major concern for todays' businesses (Besieux et al., 2018). An article by Sarkar (2021) in economic times argues that only 20% of Indian employees feel fully engaged in their work which is better than global engagement rate which is 14% but it still requires working on engaging employees by their employers. To do this, employers must seek to enhance employee communication and deepen the relationship between them and their employees in order to forge a bond of trust and mutual admiration. Also, employee engagement leads to various positive outcomes in the organization like organization citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, and organization commitment and it reduces employees' intentions to quit (Saks, 2006). Thus, it is necessary for the organizations to know the ways of enhancing employee engagement at the workplace. Various researchers studied different factors that drive employee engagement at the workplace like Chaudhary and Singh (2022) studied the role of employee well-being in

enhancing employee engagement. Sharma and Goyal (2021) argued that mindfulness play a positive role in influencing employee engagement at the workplace. Meskel is and Whittington (2020) in their study on examining the factors driving employee engagement claims that positive leadership behaviour like authentic leadership play a very crucial role in enhancing employee engagement at the workplace. Further, Koon and Ho (2020) also asserted that perceived authentic leadership enhances employee engagement through employee well-being. Many studies asserted that employee-oriented leadership styles enhance motivation level of the employees and produce various positive outcomes at the workplace (Koch and Binnewies, 2015) but there are limited studies on employee engagement (Inceoglu et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Downey et al. (2015) found that diversity practices play a very important role in enhancing trust among healthcare workers when moderated by inclusion which in turn boosts employee engagement of healthcare workers. Work engagement level of the employees can also be augmented by inclusive leaders through affective organization commitment (Choi et al., 2015). A review of the literature in this field also showed that no one has, to date, tried to study the association between authentic leadership, workplace inclusion, and employee engagement among Indian service sector employees.

So, this study aims to examine the impact of authentic leadership and workplace inclusion on employee engagement among employees working in top 6 Indian IT companies. Additionally, this study aims to investigate the role that workplace inclusion plays in mediating the link between authentic leadership and employee engagement.

This study's application to the Indian IT industry is justified because organisations like TCS, Wipro, HCL, Infosys, Cognizant, etc., are already taking steps to foster an inclusive working culture. This work has made several contributions to the literature. First is, this study looked at employee engagement as a potential result of authentic leadership and workplace inclusiveness, adding to the scant body of knowledge regarding the advantages of such practises in businesses. This study also investigated the psychological process through which authentic leadership results in employee engagement by examining workplace inclusion as a mediator. The findings of this study may also aid managers and practitioners in enhancing worker engagement, which is essential in today's cutthroat corporate environment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Authentic Leadership and Employee Engagement

Authentic leadership concept had been originated from the concept of transformational leadership, where truly transformative leaders display similar characteristics of transformation (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). They assert that the idea of authentic leadership is extended version of transformative leadership. Later on, Luthans and Avolio, (2003) developed the concept of authentic leadership(who claims that authentic leadership can be defined as "a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development". Then, Avolio and Gardner (2005) explains different concepts like authenticity, authentic leaders, authentic leadership, and authentic leadership development, and identified the difference between authentic leadership and related constructs (charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and spiritual leadership). According to former empirical studies, leaders' actions and behaviour significantly influence work attitudes of the employees (Azanza et al., 2013; Zahro et al., 2017), which further improve employees' behaviour as well as their performance (Inceoglu et al., 2018).

Today, employee engagement is viewed as a crucial factor in an organization's success. Through organizations are taking many initiatives to engage employees at the workplace by motivating them but past studies posited that one of the effective methods of engaging employees is through the actions and behaviours of leaders (Koon and Ho, 2021). Employee engagement can be defined as "the harnessing of organizational members to their work roles, in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, emotionally and cognitively during role performance" (Kahn, 1990). Another definition of employee engagement given by Anitha (2014) posited it "as the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organisation and its values". Anitha (2014) argues that when an individual is engaged, he or she is conscious of his or her role in the

company's goals and inculcates the same in their co-workers. By referring to COR (conservation of resources) theory, this study views leader's support as a form of social support as leaders can provide the required resources to their employees and helps in preserving their resources (Hobfoll, 1989).COR theory claims that people become stressed when their resources are lost, which motivates them to look for, defend, and safeguard their resources (Hobfoll, 2012).According to past research, we are favouring the promotion of employee engagement by authentic leadership for two reasons. First, authentic leaders can serve as role models for other employees because they have high degrees of self-concordance, self-control, and self-awareness (e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003). This procedure promotes an open and equitable work environment (Oh et al., 2018), which increases employee engagement (Jiang & Men, 2017).

Other reason is that authentic leaders put their team members' needs and wellbeing ahead of their own, which promotes constructive interactions with followers (see, for example, Blau, 1964). Employees who see leaders as doing them favours may feel required to repay them by engaging in actions and delivering results that are advantageous to the company (e.g., Ma & Qu, 2011; Torrente et al., 2012). Thus, when workers believe their leaders are authentic, they feel more engaged at work and vice-versa (Giallonardo et al., 2010).

Therefore, from the past literature, it could be hypothesized that:

H$_1$: Authentic leadership is significantly associated with employee engagement.

Workplace Inclusion as a Mediator

Researchers and HR practitioners now-a-days started focusing on workplace inclusion as including employees at the workplace leads to various positive outcomes for the organization like psychological contract (Mousa, 2019), organizational citizenship behaviour (Panicker et al., 2018), job satisfaction, innovation and quality of care (Brimhall and Barak, 2018) etc. The term inclusion can be defined "as the way an organization configures its systems and structures to value and leverage the potential, and to limit the disadvantages, of differences" (Roberson, 2006).It means inclusion refers to the extent to which organizations involves the diverse workforce in day-to-day business operations and decision-making process without any biasness. Further, Mor Barak and Cherin (1998) defined "the continuum of inclusion- exclusion as the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and ability to influence the decision-making process."

According to a model given by Mor Barak (2005, 2011), leaders are the key factors that influence the experience of the employees with regard to inclusion. In line with this, Shore et al. (2011) also provides a theoretical framework of inclusion in which they identified values, leaders' philosophy, strategies, values, practices, and decisions as the antecedents of perceived workplace inclusion. Wasserman et al. (2007) argues that leaders should respect the uniqueness and belongingness of every individual and engage them in genuine dialogues to create the culture of the inclusion in the organization. Over the past few years, academic focus on authentic leadership has increased (Gardner et al., 2011), as its conceptual resemblances with leader competencies are linked to creating inclusion (Cottrill et al., 2014; Jansen et al., 2014). As previously discussed, employees feel more engaged when they perceive their leaders as authentic (Anitha, 2014). Also, inclusive leaders help in enhancing work engagement level of the employees through employee creativity and affective organizational commitment (Choi et al., 2015).

Therefore, from the past literature, it can be hypothesized that:

H$_2$: Workplace inclusion mediates the relationship of authentic leadership and employee engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling Technique and Procedure

This study used descriptive research design as it strives to gather data to systematically and comprehensively describe a phenomenon, circumstance, or population. Population target for this study was the middle level employees working in top 6 IT sector companies of India that are having branch in northern India. Top 6 companies were taken from Forbes Global 2000 (2021) list. Survey method was used to conduct this study i.e., a questionnaire was sent to the desired employees though LinkedIn and email. This study uses snowball sampling to collect the data. Final responses have been ascertained after removing

incomplete data which provides data of 227 employees working in top 6 Indian IT companies. Respondents were ensured that their data will be used only for research paper so that they could provide true and genuine responses. After collecting data, the reliability of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha value. Then, to test hypotheses, regression analysis was applied in SPSS.

Analysis of the data revealed that about 67% respondents were male, majority employees were of age below 30 years (81.1%). Also, 77.1% of the respondents were d unmarried and 87.2% respondents were having 3-5 years of experience in the current organization. Moreover, among the total respondents, 67% were having overall experience of less than 5 years. Refer Table 1 for the detailed description of the respondents.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Demographic's name	Frequency	Percentage (per cent)
Gender		
Female	75	33.0
Male	152	67.0
Age		
Below 30 years	184	81.1
30-40 years	34	15.0
Above 40 years	9	4.0
Company		
HCL Technology	40	17.6
Infosys	37	16.3
L&T	40	17.6
TCS	30	13.2
Tech Mahindra	38	16.7
Wipro	42	18.5
Marital Status		
Unmarried/Single	175	77.1
Married	52	22.9
Length of service in current organization		
3-5 years	198	87.2
5-10 years	21	9.3
Above 10 years	8	3.5
Total Experience		
Below 5 years	152	67.0
5-10 years	49	21.6
10-15 years	15	6.6
Above 15 years	11	4.8

Source: Author's own

Measurement Scales

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership was measured using Walumbwa et al. (2008)'s ALQ (Authentic Leadership Questionnaire) that comprised of sixteen statements. Five-point likert scale was used to gather required information from the respondents. They were asked to mark their perception regarding their supervisor's behaviour ranging from "Almost Never as 1" to "Always as

5". Additionally, Cronbach's alpha value was evaluated to assess the scale's consistency and reliability. Reliability analysis results of ALQ scale using Cronbach's alpha value (0.909) states that ALQ scale has an acceptable level of reliability. Previous studies also showed this scale to be very reliable and consistent (Cottrill et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2016; Phuong and Takahashi, 2021).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was measured using Utretch Work Engagement Scale-UWES, 2006 (short version) given by Schaufeli et al. (2006) that comprised of nine items. This scale was also measured using five-point likert scale where employees were asked to mark the options from 1 (represents Almost Never) to 5 (represents Always). This scale measured the employee's perception regarding their engagement level in the organization. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha value was evaluated to assess the scale's consistency and reliability. Reliability analysis results of Utretch Work Engagement Scale using Cronbach's alpha value (0.841) states that this scale has an acceptable level of reliability. Previous studies also showed this scale to be very reliable and consistent (Seppälä et al., 2009; Eldor and Harpaz, 2015; Ismail et al., 2019).

Workplace Inclusion

Workplace inclusion was measured using inclusion-exclusion Scale given by Mor Barak (2017) that comprised of fifteen statements. Five-point likert scale was used to gather required information from the respondents. Employees were asked to choose the option from 1 as "Strongly Disagree" and 5 as "Strongly Agree" that represents the perception of employees regarding access to information, decision making power, and involvement in work-group. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha value was evaluated to assess the scale's consistency and reliability. Reliability analysis results of inclusion-exclusion scale using Cronbach's alpha value (0.891) states that this scale has an acceptable level of reliability. Previous studies also showed this scale to be very reliable and consistent (Brimhall and Barak, 2018).

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis results of this study are comprised of standard deviation (SD), mean (M),

Cronbach's Alpha (α), and correlation among variables under study which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Constructs	M	SD	α	AL	WI	EE
AL	3.6729	.68529	.909	1	.638**	.644**
WI	3.6746	.70486	.891	.638**	1	.669**
EE	3.7156	.70807	.841	.644**	.669**	1

** represents significance of correlation at 0.01 level
Source: Author

The employees of the top six IT sector organisations exhibited a moderate level of workplace inclusiveness, employee engagement, and authentic leadership, as evidenced by the mean scores of 3.67, 3.72, and 3.72, respectively. The instruments utilised in this study have a high level of internal consistency, as shown by Table 1's Cronbach's alpha value (greater than 0.7 implies a trustworthy scale with high internal consistency). Additionally, the findings of the correlation analysis showed that all of the variables under investigation had a positive link with one another.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Path	R2	β	SE	P-Value	T-Value	BC 95 per centCI	
						LLCI	ULCI
AL →WI →EE							
Total Effect	.4141	.6649	.0527	.000	12.6114	.5610	.7688
Direct Effect		.3780	.0617	.000	6.1270	.2564	.4996
Indirect Effect		.2869	.0485	-	-	.2003	.3897

AL →WI →EE = Authentic Leadership → Workplace Inclusion → Employee Engagement, β = Unstandardised regression coefficient, R2 = R-square change, SE= Standard Error, BC 95 per cent CI = 95 per cent Bootstrapping Confidence Interval, LLCI = Lower Limit Confidence Interval, ULCI = Upper Limit Confidence Interval
Source: Author's own

In order to test Hypothesis 1 of the study, regression analysis was applied to examine the overall effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement. Results of regression analysis posited that authentic leadership has been significantly associated with employee engagement and authentic leadership explains about 41% variation in employee engagement. The impact of authentic leadership on employee engagement was also found significant (P-value = .000, β= .6649). Thus, hypothesis 1 received empirical support.

For testing Hypothesis 2, regression analysis was applied using process macro v4.0 given by Hayes (2013) in SPSS 24.0 version. Results of this testing revealed the partial mediation effect of authentic

leadership on employee engagement through workplace Inclusion as direct effect of authentic leadership on employee engagement in the presence of workplace inclusion remained significant (β = .3780, p-value = .000)while indirect effect was also significant (β = .2869). Thus, hypothesis 2 has also been accepted.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the role of authentic leadership in increasing employee engagement in the IT sector through the mediating effect of workplace inclusion. As anticipated, there is a partial mediating role of workplace inclusion in the relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement. The findings of this study are consistent with those of a study by Choi et al. (2015), which proposed that affective organisational commitment, a mechanism via which inclusive leadership influences employee work engagement, plays a major role in employee work engagement. These conclusions have ramifications for both theory and management.

Theoretical Implications

In the present time where about 4/5th of Indian employees feels disengaged at work (Sarkar, 2021), it is crucial to introduce such policies or practices in the organization through which engagement level of the employees can be increased. The importance of employee engagement can be understood through the benefits of engaging employees at the workplace. Engaged workforce helps in reducing turnover intentions of the employees (Sandhya and Sulphey, 2020), and in enhancing satisfaction level of the employees (Noercahyo, 2021) and performance of the individuals (Salanova *et al.*, 2005) as well as organizations (Xanthopoulou, 2009). Further, the relationship between authentic leadership, workplace inclusion, and employee engagement is not yet explored among Indian employees. Thus, this study also contributes to filling the gap in the existing literature. Further, this study found the ways of enhancing employee engagement which is very crucial aspect for today's businesses.

Practical Implications

The current study ascertained the importance of authentic leadership and workplace inclusion in IT companies. On the basis of the results of this study, it could be argued that organizations must develop the characteristics of authentic leadership among

senior employees and to make sure that their workforce feel included at the workplace as authentic leadership and workplace inclusion helps in enhancing employee engagement that is already claimed in this study. Thus, if managers need their workforce to be engaged in their work, they must focus on developing the features of authentic leadership among senior employees as employees feel included when they perceive their leaders as genuine and authentic.

CONCLUSION

The current study has produced a theoretical framework that illustrates the connection between workplace inclusion, employee engagement, and authentic leadership among workers in the IT sector. Additionally, this study conducted an empirical test of the theoretical model that establishes a connection between authentic leadership and employee engagement through the mediating effect of workplace inclusion. The study's findings validated the model and demonstrated that workplace inclusion acted as a partial mediating factor in the link between employee engagement and authentic leadership Therefore, it can be argued that authentic leaders who are true to themselves and to others, who share objective and pertinent information with all, who are self-aware, and who make decisions based on moral principles; foster an inclusive work environment where employees feel empowered to make decisions and have access to information within the company. Additionally, workers who have a sense of belonging at work are more likely to be engaged, excited, energised, and involved in their job. Previous research (Downey et al., 2015; Goswami & Goswami, 2018; Jerónimo et al., 2022; Malodia & Goyal, 2023; Pleasant, 2017) also supports these findings. It implies that managers should seek for, develop, and support authentic leaders because they foster a sense of belonging among staff members, which raises staff members' levels of engagement.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study has its own limitations which can be taken into consideration by future researchers. First is, this study is cross-sectional in nature as this study look at the data from a population at a specific point of time. Thus, future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal study on the same variables. Second is, this study has been conducted among the employees of IT sector, so, the results of this study can't be generalised on the population of other sectors. Thus, future researchers are stimulated to conduct this research in other sectors as well.

Future researchers are also encouraged to study various factors that management should consider to develop characteristics of authenticity among leaders. Third is, this study has not considered demographic variables, thus future researchers can include different demographics as moderating variables as different demographics may have different perception with regard to the relation of Authentic Leadership, Workplace Inclusion, and Employee Engagement.

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