Article

Inclusive Leadership and Employee Engagement as Critical Drivers of Sustainability in Telecommunication Companies

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Abstract: There has been a growing concern about the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the telecommunications industry. The telecommunications industry is undergoing rapid technological advancements, leading to increased competition and pressure on employees. Creating an inclusive workplace in such a dynamic environment is essential to attracting and retaining talented professionals and driving eco-innovation for sustainable development in Industry 4.0. Despite the importance of inclusive leadership, there is dearth of studies exploring the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the telecommunications industry. Hence, this study sought to examine the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in selected telecommunication companies in Namibia. A qualitative approach was adopted, where face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The participants (22 executives) were selected for interviews from two telecommunication companies in Namibia using a purposive sampling method. Data collection involved recording and transcribing participant interviews using Microsoft Word. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 20 software. Results show the importance of empathy and non-hierarchical leadership behaviour as the most critical factor influencing team engagement and discretionary effort in the telecommunications industry in Namibia. Meanwhile, clear career advancement pathways, work autonomy, cross-departmental collaboration, and supervisory support are major contributors to employee engagement for innovative performance and sustainability in the telecommunications industry.

Keywords: employee engagement; equity; diversity; inclusion; inclusive leadership; telecommunications industry

1. Introduction

In recent times, employee engagement has emerged as a critical factor for organisational success, especially in the rapidly evolving telecommunications industry. Employees are recognised as the cornerstone of an organisation's value, and their engagement is essential for achieving organisational goals (Atiku and Van Wyk 2024). In the telecommunications industry, the recent significant changes due to technological advancements have increased competition. Hence, employee engagement is a critical factor in the success and sustainability of telecommunication companies (Chen and Tang 2018). Engaged employees are motivated, committed, and actively contribute to achieving business objectives. However, one of the key drivers of employee engagement is inclusive leadership, which is the ability of leaders to create an environment where all employees feel valued, respected, and included in decision-making processes (Blomme et al. 2015).

Leadership plays a pivotal role in organisational functionalities, such as organisational culture, employee engagement, and innovative performance (Choi et al. 2015; Ganiyu and Oladejo 2022). Hence, inclusive leadership drives employee engagement. This leadership

style creates a sense of belonging among employees, resulting in higher engagement levels and improved productivity and sustainability. It enhances diverse perspectives and ensures collaboration, leading to innovative problem-solving and better decision-making (Syed and Ozbilgin 2019). In the same vein, inclusive leaders empower employees to contribute ideas and opinions freely, creating a psychologically safe and inclusive environment where everyone feels important and involved. This leadership strategy drives employee engagement, as employees are motivated to go the extra mile to contribute to the organisation's success (Bao et al. 2021).

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of inclusion leadership and employee engagement in organisations, this critical aspect is often overlooked in the telecommunications industry. Reports from one of the telecommunication companies in Namibia reveal a concerning pattern of high absenteeism, poor communication, and lack of employee involvement and support, leading to a critical challenge in achieving productivity and sustainability. This challenge requires a transformative approach that prioritises inclusive leadership that brings about a high level of employee performance, fostering customer satisfaction and sustainability.

Furthermore, there is a significant lack of scholarly work on these issues specifically within the telecommunications industry in Namibia. This notable deficit in the literature hinders a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of inclusive leadership and how it enhances employee attitudes, loyalty, commitment, and organisational sustainability. Considering this gap, the present study aimed to investigate the influence of inclusive leadership and employee engagement on sustainability in the Namibian telecommunications industry.

2. Literature Review

This section focuses on the review of scholarly works related to the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement that ensures organisational sustainability. Inclusive leadership and employee engagement have become critical topics in the field of leadership and organisational behavioural effectiveness. In today's highly competitive business environment, organisations are constantly looking for ways to improve their innovative performance and ensure sustainability or gain a competitive advantage over others. Inclusive leadership and employee engagement have been identified as two pivotal keys to a sustainable competitive advantage.

2.1. Inclusive Leadership

Inclusive leadership is a leadership style that is used by leaders to address the emotional and psychological needs of their employees (Nguyen et al. 2024). It is considered a strategic approach that cultivates an inclusive environment where all employees, regardless of age, sex, race, or gender, feel valued and respected. This practice has been proven to have a positive influence on employee engagement in various industries. Furthermore, it promotes diversity and encourages the participation of all employees. Also, it creates a sense of psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable sharing their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of judgment or retribution (Nishii 2013). This fosters a culture of open communication and collaboration, which significantly impacts employees' engagement.

In the workplace, inclusive leaders promote fairness and equality, which has been linked to higher levels of engagement. More importantly, inclusive leaders operate an open-door policy, take a non-judgmental attitude, and apply an empathetic approach of listening to and considering diverse perspectives. When they do so, employees feel safe to express themselves freely without fear of discrimination or exclusion (Bass 2019). In addition, inclusive leaders recognise and utilise the unique strengths and abilities of employees to achieve organisational goals. This enhances a culture of trust and mutual respect, resulting in higher levels of employee engagement and effective decision-making (Chen et al. 2020).

According to Shore and Chung (2022), inclusive leadership is a complex concept that is based on three major dimensions: openness, accessibility, and availability. Openness has become a vital component of strong inclusivity and work engagement in today's diverse and dynamic world. It entails the leader's readiness and proficiency in being transparent, approachable, and open to diverse viewpoints, concepts, and inputs from their team (Mavrokordatos 2015). This openness is essential in ensuring a culture of continuous progress. A leader who values inclusivity welcomes feedback and sees it as a valuable chance for personal and professional growth (Anane-Simon and Atiku 2023).

In terms of accessibility, inclusive leaders prioritise their approachability and availability, creating a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. By being accessible, leaders facilitate the development of an inclusive and welcoming work culture (Jeremiah et al. 2023; Carmeli et al. 2010). This promotes trust and transparency between leaders and team members, fostering collaboration and productivity. Furthermore, accessibility encompasses both physical and emotional presence. In addition to being physically present, an inclusive leader is emotionally available to their team, offering guidance, support, and a listening ear when needed. Moreover, in today's digital era, accessibility also extends to various communication channels such as email, messaging platforms, and video conferencing. With remote work becoming prevalent, leaders must be accessible through these means to ensure all team members, regardless of their location, feel connected and included.

The availability dimension of inclusive leadership suggests the need for inclusive leaders to actively engage their employees and display a genuine interest in their well-being (Shore and Chung 2022). Also, being present and involved in the day-to-day operations, allows them to understand and address any challenges or obstacles faced by the team. This hands-on approach promotes teamwork and problem-solving within the team. Additionally, an available leader is open to feedback and suggestions, recognising that no one is the epitome of knowledge and that people may not have all the answers. By actively seeking and implementing feedback, an inclusive leader creates a culture of continuous improvement and empowers team members to take ownership of their work and contribute to the team's success. This fosters a sense of connection and inclusion within the team (Carmeli et al. 2010).

2.2. Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has been described as the level of commitment, motivation, and involvement that employees have towards their work and the organisation (Saks 2019). This is driven by employees' perceived value, respect, and the opportunity to contribute their unique perspectives and ideas to the organisational success (Nishii 2013). Based on the feeling of psychological safety, and trust in their leaders, employees are likely to be fully engaged and go the extra mile to contribute to the organisation's success and turnover will be reduced (Shuck et al. 2017). Various measures have been developed to assess employee engagement. These include job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation.

The success and productivity of an organisation depend greatly on job satisfaction (Chandani et al. 2016). It is a crucial factor that refers to an employee's level of contentment and fulfilment on the job. Job satisfaction goes beyond mere happiness. It encompasses a deeper sense of fulfilment derived from one's work. It is a key driver of employee engagement, which has become increasingly important in today's competitive business environment. Studies have shown that a strong relationship exists between job satisfaction and employee engagement, as a satisfied employee is more likely to be engaged, resulting in increased productivity, them doing a better job, and innovative performance (Bailey et al. 2015; Chandani et al. 2016). Moreover, job satisfaction is a significant factor in employee retention. Satisfied employees are less likely to leave the organisation, reducing turnover rates. This benefits the organisation both in the short and long run, as it saves time and resources spent on recruiting and training new employees, while also maintaining a stable and experienced workforce essential for growth (Bailey et al. 2015).

Employee engagement relies heavily on commitment. This serves as the driving force that inspires employees to give their best effort and remain devoted to the job and the organisation (Bailey et al. 2015). A lack of employee commitment leads to feelings of disconnect and disinterest, resulting in decreased productivity, high turnover rates, and a negative impact on the company's overall success (Atiku and Van Wyk 2024). Committed employees are not only emotionally stable but also take pride in their contributions to increased organisational productivity, performance, and success. This gives a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Committed employees are highly engaged and motivated, often seeking out new challenges and striving for excellence in their work. Moreover, they are more likely to act as advocates for the company, speaking highly of it, recommending it to others, and defending it in times of criticism.

Motivation is a crucial factor in ensuring a positive work environment and instilling a sense of belonging and dedication in employees. It is a driving force for employees to go the extra mile in carrying out their job duties and contribute to the organisation's growth. One of the reasons why motivation is essential for employee engagement is that it gives employees a sense of purpose and significance. A motivated employee believes they contribute meaningfully to the organisation's overall set goals (Chandani et al. 2016). This keeps the employees engaged and motivated. Furthermore, a motivating organisation maintains a stable and well-balanced workforce. Moreover, motivation promotes job satisfaction among employees, resulting in higher levels of engagement. Job satisfaction is crucial for employee engagement as contented employees are more committed to their work (Markos and Sridevi 2010). Organisations must understand that motivation is an ongoing process requiring continuous effort and investment. Employers must regularly communicate with the employees, acknowledge their efforts, and provide opportunities for growth and development to keep them motivated.

2.3. Inclusive Leadership, Employee Engagement, and Sustainability

Inclusive leadership has been recognised as a powerful driving force of sustainability in any organisation (Galpin et al. 2015; Abdou et al. 2023). Amid the rising global environmental crisis, inclusive leadership prioritises sustainability and social equity. An inclusive leader safeguards the environment through employee inclusiveness. Unlike traditional leadership models, inclusive leadership adopts a holistic approach that interrelates environmental concerns with diversity and inclusion (Bhutto et al. 2021; Patwary et al. 2023; Shore et al. 2018). Organisations tap into a diverse pool of talents and perspectives by ensuring an environment where all employees feel valued, empowered, and included. This approach encourages employees to actively contribute to sustainability goals, driving innovation and adaptability (Galpin and Whittington 2012; Galpin et al. 2015; Abdou et al. 2023). According to Galpin and Whittington (2012), sustainability-conscious leaders embrace diversity in all its forms, fostering a sense of openness, trust, and transparency. These qualities enable employees to fully understand and align with the organisational goals, taking ownership of their roles and driving creative solutions for sustainable success.

In light of this, engaged employees are passionate and committed to the organisation's sustainability goals (Galpin and Whittington 2012). This passionate engagement manifests in the participation in meaningful programmes like reducing energy consumption, promoting responsible waste management, and contributing to community development projects. These initiatives foster a strong sense of purpose and drive tangible change. Furthermore, engaged employees naturally integrate sustainable practices into their daily routines. Behavioural conducts such as material recycling, minimising paper consumption, and promoting eco-friendly attitudes are cultivated and demonstrated in the cause duty by employees. This behavioural shift creates a culture of sustainability within the organisation (Abdou et al. 2023).

Therefore, adopting a sustainable approach in Namibia's telecommunications industry, through investments in inclusive leadership and employee engagement, yields significant benefits. Such an approach ensures a diverse and engaged workforce, driving innova-

tion and leading to enhanced operational efficiency, improved service delivery, and the development of cutting-edge technologies. This, in turn, attracts and retains top talent. Organisations committed to sustainability are perceived as more attractive and retain valuable employees, ultimately improving their competitive edge in a rapidly evolving industry like telecommunications. Additionally, a reputation for sustainability builds trust, enhances the organisation's image and market position, and contributes to a clear and healthier environment, securing a brighter future for both the industry and the nation as a whole (Galpin et al. 2015).

3. Materials and Methods

This study explored the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the telecommunications industry in Namibia using an interpretivist stance. A qualitative approach was adopted to gather in-depth information concerning participants' perceptions and views on inclusive leadership and employee engagement in selected telecommunication companies in Namibia. This sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of individuals who possessed specific knowledge, experiences, or perspectives relevant to the research objectives. This sampling technique enabled the researchers to capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences within the telecommunications industry. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were used for flexibility and uniformity. Each interview session took about 30–40 min on average. In addition, the interview sessions were recorded on tape with the consent of the participants, and this was later transcribed to a Word document for coding. The semi-structured interview guide was divided into three (3) sections. Each section has four (4) questions. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select 22 participants for interviews from the participating telecommunication companies in Namibia. Participants were selected based on their prominence in the Namibian telecoms industry. By carefully selecting top management, middle management, and frontline employees in the participating telecommunication companies, this study aimed to obtain rich and insightful data that would provide a comprehensive understanding of inclusive leadership and employee engagement, thereby enhancing the credibility of this study's findings.

3.1. Research Participants

This study adopted face-to-face interviews to gather non-numerical data from the research participants in selected telecommunication companies in Namibia. The interviews were conducted in the participants' respective offices. This was to ensure that the participants were relaxed and in comfortable positions where they would express their opinions freely. The study drew on twenty-two (22) purposively selected top management, middle management, and frontline employees in the selected telecommunication companies. The participants were purposively chosen from the entire population of the two giant telecommunication companies in Namibia based on the critical roles they play as staff members. Before the commencement of the interviews, the purpose of this study was reaffirmed to the participants, and all ethical considerations such as anonymity, confidentiality, and consent to be interviewed were thoroughly explained. To ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data, a comprehensive interview guide was developed and meticulously analysed. This guide was carefully crafted to capture the relevant information required to meet the objectives of this study. Additionally, observational notes were taken during data collection to provide a comprehensive record of the interviews. The order of the questions in the interview guide was carefully structured to elicit insights into the participants' inclusive leadership strategy in their respective telecommunication companies and its influence on employee engagement.

3.2. Sample

Despite the sample size being limited to twenty-two (22), we consider this to have been appropriate for our qualitative research, as it enabled the researchers to delve deeply into the

experiences and perspectives of the participants. The purposive sampling method proved advantageous, as it allowed the researchers to gather rich data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. This knowledge was then used to provide insights into the potential influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in telecommunication companies. The decision to use purposive sampling was justified by the aim to capture the authentic experiences of the management cadre as regards their leadership inclusiveness and its influence on subordinates' work engagement.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a multifaceted process that involves various stages, including coding, transcribing, editing, and verifying data (Kaupa and Atiku 2020). Cooper and Schindler (2008) state that data analysis entails compressing raw data into a manageable format to facilitate the identification of patterns and trends. When analysing these qualitative data, audio files from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed responses were then categorised into themes based on their content and coded accordingly. To ensure accuracy and validity, the authors implemented measures to mitigate confirmation bias (Kaupa and Atiku 2020; Steinke 2004). For instance, the transcribed data were independently coded by the authors, with the generated codes verified by an external qualitative researcher for accuracy, consistency, and objectivity. The external party's involvement played a crucial role in avoiding subjectivity and ensuring an unbiased analysis. The authors engaged in discussions to reach a consensus on the initial themes, which were then double-checked and verified by the neutral investigator to minimise confirmation bias.

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software, allowing for the organisation of qualitative data into themes and sub-themes (Dyili et al. 2018; Ganiyu and Genty 2022). Before this, the data were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and then imported into NVivo for analysis. The software facilitated the identification of patterns and themes, represented as nodes. Each node contained data related to a specific theme, allowing for a thorough examination. Themes were identified and scrutinised for trends in previous research (Bell Emma et al. 2022), with the researcher's personal experience playing a vital role in interpreting the data. The use of NVivo 12 software supported the identification, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data patterns, which are key components of thematic analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Through the interviews, we sought to gather participants' perspectives on the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement. The results from the thematic analysis revealed three (3) primary themes and nine (9) sub-themes. These themes are factors that contribute to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies, inclusive leadership steps that encourage employee engagement, and inclusive leadership practices that enhance employee engagement. Both the primary themes and the sub-themes are illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, nine (9) sub-themes emerged from the three (3) primary themes. Leadership and management style, meaningful work and autonomy, and organisational culture and work environment emerged as sub-themes to factors that contribute to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies. Inclusive leadership steps that encourage employee engagement include enabling direct participation, improving consultation channels, and linking inputs to outcomes. While accommodating flexible work, equitable opportunities and open and authentic communication were identified as sub-themes generated from inclusive leadership practices that enhance employee engagement. These sub-themes are discussed in the next subsection.
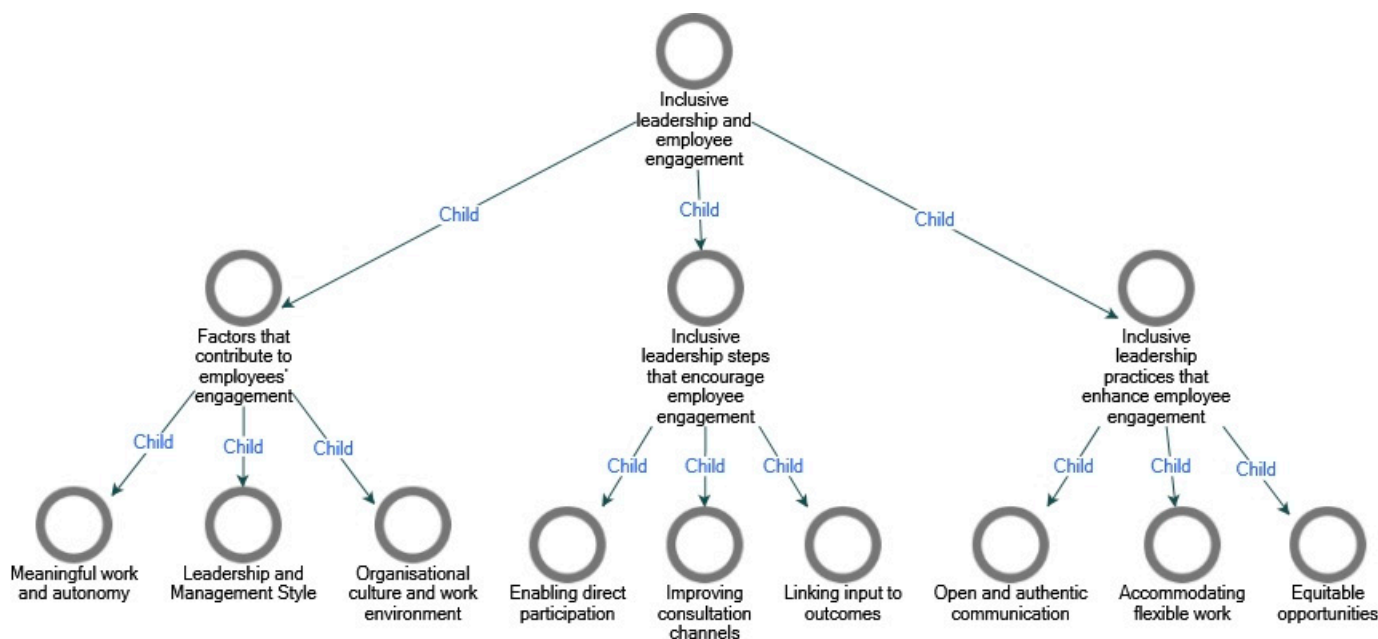
Figure 1. Inclusive leadership and employee engagement.

4.1. Factors That Contribute to Employees' Engagement in Telecommunication Companies

The leadership style and management practices were identified as a significant influence on employee engagement (Shen et al. 2023; Atiku et al. 2023). Similarly, we found that inclusive and empowering approaches enhance motivation, while authoritarian styles swiftly erode morale. Supervisory support for flexibility is said to be crucial in the demanding telecoms industry (Atiku and Van Wyk 2024; Carmeli et al. 2010; Edmondson 2018). From the analysed data, emphasis is placed on the intrinsic factors, such as meaningful and challenging work, and a sense of autonomy, which are essential for sustained commitment. Similarly, a lack of development and advancement opportunities were identified as hindrances to dedication. However, the major factors that contribute to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies as revealed by the analysed data include leadership and management style, meaningful work and autonomy, and the organisational culture and work environment.

4.1.1. Leadership and Management Style

Leadership has been described as a motivational tool used to achieve a common or set goal (Atiku et al. 2023). Leaders who engage in this management style attract trust and concern for employees and foster discretionary effort, benefiting organisations. From the analysed data, this sub-theme emerged as one of the factors that contributes to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies. Two of the participants in this study expressed their views as follows:

"For me, the main driver of my engagement is my direct supervisor and their management approach. When leaders empower, provide growth opportunities and acknowledge work, it boosts morale. But micromanagers who don't recognize efforts reduce motivation fast". (Participant 13)

"I tend to be much more engaged with work when senior leaders and middle managers alike have an open, inclusive style vs. being rigid and authoritarian. Even if strategy comes from the top down, feeling heard by compassionate leaders makes all the difference in my dedication". (Participant 5)

In the above responses, the participants provide invaluable insights into the influence of leadership and management styles on employee engagement. Emphasis is placed on the impact of direct supervisors on personal engagement. Also, empowerment, growth

opportunities, and recognition are alluded to as contributing to higher engagement, while micromanagement and lack of recognition are identified as factors that diminish motivation. Furthermore, the participants highlight the importance of leadership styles at various organisational levels. These responses agree with Eisenberger et al. (2010) and Saks (2019), who posit that time and effort are invested when employees perceive being valued and supported by leaders. Hence, open and inclusive styles foster engagement, while rigid and authoritarian approaches hinder it. Even when the strategy is top-down, compassionate leaders who value input and inclusivity create a sense of commitment and dedication. These perspectives underscore the pivotal role of leaders in shaping the work environment and influencing employee motivation and engagement.

4.1.2. Meaningful Work and Autonomy

This sub-theme emerged as one of the factors that contributes to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies. The analysed data showed that most of the participants in this study gave insights into what they consider meaningful work and claimed that being autonomous aids their work output. Two of the participants' responses are directly quoted below.

> "The degree to which I find daily work activities to be meaningful and impactful is a huge contributor to my personal engagement. Interesting challenges that allow me to learn, develop and use my full skill set keep me fully immersed and productive for sure". (Participant 9)

> "I tend to feel much more motivated when I have enough autonomy over my workload, tools and approach rather than just being told exactly what to do and when. A sense of freedom and trust to handle responsibilities my way makes the work more fulfilling". (Participant 3)

Insights from the participants' responses highlighted the crucial role of meaningful work and autonomy as drivers of employee engagement. The participants emphasised the importance of finding daily tasks meaningful and impactful. It was further pointed out that challenging work that fosters learning, growth, and skill utilisation enhances engagement. The concept of autonomy, where employees have control over their workload, tools, and approach, was given as one of the factors that contributes to employees' engagement in telecommunication companies. This aligns with Sonnentag et al. (2013) and Kossek et al. (2014), who argue that telecommunications companies with flexible work schedules have more engaged workers. This freedom empowers them, leading to job satisfaction and ownership of their contributions. Thus, meaningful work and autonomy are essential ingredients for employee engagement. They ensure a sense of purpose, empowerment, and satisfaction, ultimately contributing to a more engaged and productive workforce.

4.1.3. Organisational Culture and Work Environment

The perceived innovation and inclusivity of the organisational culture energise employees, while bureaucratic resistance to change, unfairness, and bias in processes diminish loyalty, particularly among employees (Alfes 2018; Bhatia and Kumar 2022). It was evident from the participants that an all-inclusive organisational culture and work environment ensures employee engagement, leading to a positive attitude as well as productive output. The participants also expressed that the absence of a positive work environment and inclusive organisational culture demoralises employees, resulting in discouragement and a high rate of employee turnover.

> "I tend to feel the most dedication to my role when the overall culture feels inclusive, innovative and purpose-driven across levels and teams vs. rigid, bureaucratic or siloed by function or level. A truly vibrant mood is infectious"! (Participant 22)

> "For me, visible Work-life balance support from the highest levels of leadership—through policies, statements and behaviours—signals respect for wellness and inspires loyalty beyond formal hours or duties. Burnout risks sever that pact". (Participant 14)

"From my view, the consistency between organisational values/branding and actual day-to-day behaviours and operations is crucial for trust and engagement. When nice statements aren't matched by real practices, I notice a cynical culture emerging that harms morale". (Participant 7)

Participants offered valuable perspectives on the impact of the organisational culture and work environment on employee commitment and engagement. The responses showed the importance of a positive and inclusive culture, which encourages dedication and engagement. However, rigid or bureaucratic cultures hinder employee commitment. Furthermore, the need for visible supervisory support and flexibility was emphasised as it creates a conducive work environment that values employee well-being and reduces burnout. This finding agrees with Owusu-Bempah et al.'s (2014) observations regarding cultural barriers. Female participants expressed significantly lesser contentment with growth opportunities than the men, highlighting ongoing challenges in diversity and inclusion initiatives. This disparity between organisational values of inclusivity and innovation is perceived as inequitable access. This insight underscores the significant influence of the organisational culture and work environment on employee dedication and engagement.

4.2. Inclusive Leadership Steps That Encourage Employee Engagement

Several scholarly pieces of evidence have described inclusive leadership as a process that ensures employees are given equal opportunities to showcase their talents and abilities irrespective of their background, race, or gender (Shore et al. 2018). As such, some of these steps or approaches, when deployed, encourage employees. For instance, granting autonomy enhances trust in execution, while ensuring transparency impacts the inputs and outputs. In the analysed data, participants described enabling direct participation, improving consultation channels, and linking inputs to outcomes as some of the inclusive leadership steps that encourage employee engagement in the telecoms industry.

4.2.1. Enabling Direct Participation

This sub-theme explored strategies for enhancing direct participation. Participants advocated for crowdsourcing ideas from frontline staff and empowering teams to spearhead solutions. The idea is to enhance inclusiveness and to avoid marginalisation of any employee. A related response from one of the participants is captured below.

"I would advocate adopting participative techniques like crowdsourcing innovative ideas directly from frontline staff or letting cross-functional teams vote on solution options with weighted input into the final direction". (Participant 17)

To enhance employee involvement in decision-making, participants proposed strategies that emphasise democratising inputs. Likewise, it was pointed out that building on inclusivity requires recruiting employees from various levels as formal representatives in strategic planning task forces. This mechanism will provide a structured platform for peer feedback and diverse viewpoints within the decision-making process.

4.2.2. Improving Consultation Channels

In a bid to uncover the inclusive leadership steps that encourage employee engagement, the participants were asked how their improving consultation channels influence employee engagement in their respective telecommunication companies. The participants' responses indicated how this strategy is deployed to encourage employees. Participants 7 and 14 explained it as follows:

"My aim is inviting historically marginalized voices onto advisory panels through anonymous nominations addressing roadblocks to candid input to date—ensuring traditionally excluded groups inform policies impacting them before determinations". (Participant 14)

"I plan on hosting skip-level forums quarterly so insights reaching executive group channels actually represent the breadth and diversity of workers' truth not just the managers' possibly skewed perspectives on reality". (Participant 7)

The participants raised the need to bring marginalised voices into advisory panels. Also, anonymous nominations were suggested to overcome barriers to candid inputs, ensuring that excluded groups have a significant role in shaping policies that directly affect them, leading to more equitable decision-making for innovative performance. Furthermore, quarterly skip-level forums that facilitate direct communication between employees and executive leadership were proposed. This is to ensure that insights reaching executives represent the entire workforce, capturing the diversity of perspectives and avoiding potential biases in information flow. This approach provides executives with a more accurate understanding of the organisation's reality. This validated Wang and Shi (2021)'s notion that links beneficial attitudinal and behavioural outcomes among employees to leadership inclusiveness through liberal consulting channels.

4.2.3. Linking Inputs to Outcomes

This sub-theme emerged and gave insights as one of the inclusive leadership steps that encourages employee engagement. The participants claimed that linking employee inputs and tangible outcomes within the organisation shows transparency, visibility, and accountability. Participant 2 explained it as follows:

"My priority is creating lead indicators reflecting workforce sentiment plus policy effectiveness analytics tied to leadership goals, proving input drives real strategic outcomes through exposing and resolving adoption barriers that surfaced proactively". (Participant 2)

Strengthening the connection between employee feedback and organisational outcomes requires strategies that prioritise transparency, visibility, and accountability. Hence, participant 2 proposed creating lead indicators that reflect the workforce sentiment and policy effectiveness. These indicators would be linked to leadership goals, establishing a direct connection between employee inputs and strategic outcomes. This strategy aims to demonstrate the direct impact of employee inputs for shaping organisational strategies by proactively identifying and addressing adoption barriers.

4.3. *Inclusive Leadership Practices That Enhance Employee Engagement*

Inclusive leadership and employee engagement play crucial roles in the success of organisations, particularly in the telecommunications industry. Implementing inclusive leadership practices and strategies in the telecommunications industry can enhance employee engagement, resulting in improved innovative performance, commitment, and overall organisational effectiveness as well as a sustainable competitive advantage. To unpack how effective this strategy can be at enhancing employee engagement, the following sub-themes were generated.

4.3.1. Open and Authentic Communication

This sub-theme emerged as one of the inclusive practices that can enhance employee engagement. Open and effective communication has been described as a crucial tool for inclusive leaders to enhance employee engagement (Sarfraz et al. 2020; Shore et al. 2018). Embracing diversity and leveraging it to achieve common goals is a key aspect of ensuring inclusiveness. Effective communication with all team members, regardless of their backgrounds, cultures, or beliefs, builds trust, ensures collaboration, and promotes team unity. One of the participants' expressed views as follows.

"Our CEO frequently hosts open office hours without filters where any employee can ask candid questions and expect straight answers rather than spin. This raw transparency when discussing challenges facing the company earns immense trust". (Participant 17)

Most of the participants attested to the fact that there are profound benefits of open and genuine communication within their organisations, explaining the crucial role of transparent leadership as it enhances trust and inclusiveness. Participant 17 recounted their experience of a CEO who regularly hosts unfiltered 'office hours,' where employees can candidly ask questions and receive forthright answers. This strategy is in line with the

recommendation of Shore et al. (2018) that openness and effective communication are traits of inclusive leadership. This strategy builds immense trust, as the leaders openly discuss the challenges facing the company.

4.3.2. Accommodating Flexible Work

The participants revealed that accommodating flexible work arrangements is crucial to employee engagement. As one of the inclusive practices that enhances employee engagement, the participants shared positive experiences and highlighted the benefits of flexibility in enhancing employee engagement, well-being, and loyalty. Participant 11 had this to say.

> *"Within reasonable boundaries set collaboratively, my manager empowers staff to self-direct schedules in ways that align individual energy levels to workflow. His flexibility allowing balance enhances my loyalty and engagement tremendously during intense projects". (Participant 11)*

The analysed data showed that participants shared positive experiences with flexible work arrangements in their organisations. For instance, participant 11 explained that flexible work arrangements foster employee engagement, well-being, and loyalty. The participant further cited a manager who empowers employees to set flexible schedules within defined parameters. This allows individuals to optimise their energy levels and work–life balance, resulting in enhanced loyalty and commitment, particularly during demanding projects. This resonates with Kossek et al. (2014), who highlighted the positive correlation between flexible work arrangements and employee engagement in telecommunication firms. The industry's demanding and ever-evolving nature enhances the importance that employees attribute to flexibility and work–life integration, resulting in increased engagement.

4.3.3. Equitable Opportunities

This sub-theme was generated to demonstrate that when there is no marginalisation, employees work as a team, which increases productivity and profitability for the organisation. The participants noted that witnessing everyone having equal opportunities to shine keeps them invested. Two of the participants expressed their views as follows:

> *"I'm encouraged by Humidity Human Relations' optimization of succession planning and high potential programmes to consciously recognize non-traditional talents who demonstrate outstanding potential through objective strengths evaluations". (Participant 9)*

> *"Coming from companies where leaders mostly tapped within existing networks to fill roles, I find the meritocratic and equitable talent review processes here refreshing—levelling the playing field for anyone ambitious to earn elevated responsibility". (Participant 2)*

From the responses, it can be deduced that the participants were happy with their organisations for promoting equity and fairness in talent management. This promotes diversity and inclusion by acknowledging potential based on merit rather than traditional factors. The meritocratic approach and coaching for managers to mitigate unconscious biases were emphasised. In the same vein, the organisation's succession plans and high-potential programmes were commended by the participants.

5. Practical Implications

This study explored the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the telecommunications industry. It significantly expands the knowledge base in leadership and organisational behavioural effectiveness by providing valuable insights into the interplay between leadership practices and employee engagement. This study offers evidence-based guidance for leaders in the Namibian telecommunications industry, enabling them to enhance employee engagement within their organisations. It sheds light on the role of inclusive leadership in creating a positive work environment, promoting employee well-being, enhancing satisfaction, and ensuring sustainability in the telecommunications industry. By adopting inclusive leadership approaches, organisations can reap the

benefits of increased employee engagement, leading to improved innovative performance and sustainability (Lee et al. 2019). For employees within the telecommunications industry, this study holds immense significance. Its focus on transparency, participation, and consultation directly impacts their daily experiences. By emphasising the value of inclusive leadership practices, this study seeks to improve employee well-being, satisfaction, and engagement as critical drivers of sustainability in the telecommunications industry. It empowers employees to voice their opinions, contribute to decision-making, and actively shape their work environment, fostering a supportive and empowering culture for eco-innovation and sustainability in the telecommunications industry. This study also serves as a springboard for future studies on inclusive leadership and employee engagement in other sectors.

6. Limitation and Future Research

The major limitation of this study is its methodological approach. The exclusive use of a qualitative design, employing inductive reasoning through interview sessions only, limits the scope of the data and perspectives. In addition, the sample only comprised supervisors, middle managers, and top executives, which excluded inputs from their subordinates. Enhancing the rigour and validity of future research on this topic may require employing a quantitative or mixed-methods approach. This would allow for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, expanding the sample to include subordinates' perspectives would enrich the analysis and contribute to a holistic exploration of the relationships between inclusiveness, employee engagement, and sustainability.

7. Conclusions

This study explored the influence of inclusive leadership on employee engagement in the telecommunications industry. We revealed inclusive elements such as compassion, empathy, and fairness as inclusive leadership practices that ignite discretionary effort and resilience among employees. These practices create a psychologically safe environment, enhance trust, and strengthen the commitment to achieving an innovative performance. Additionally, this study showed that leaders who prioritise non-hierarchical decision-making and demonstrate integrity through values-driven actions create a sense of belonging and inspire employees' loyalty and commitment. Furthermore, this study uncovered openness, empathy, supervisory support, flexibility and equitable opportunities as drivers of positive leadership behaviour in the telecommunications industry. More importantly, this study revealed that inclusive leadership practices enhance employee engagement and facilitate participative innovation and high-potential development. We conclude by suggesting that leaders should inculcate inclusiveness into their leadership strategy to drive green creativity, innovative performance, and eco-innovation for a sustainable competitive advantage in the telecommunications industry.

Data Availability Statement: The data generated during and/or analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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