

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND VIRTUAL TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract. Virtual and hybrid work reduce the social cues through which employees judge whether it is safe to speak up, acknowledge errors, or request assistance. This study examined whether inclusive leadership predicted virtual team effectiveness directly and indirectly through psychological safety. A cross-sectional survey involved 200 employees working in virtual or hybrid teams. Inclusive leadership (9 items), psychological safety (7 items), and virtual team effectiveness (8 items) were measured on five-point response scales. The hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlations, linear and multiple regression, and mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Inclusive leadership positively predicted psychological safety ($B = 0.599$, $\beta = 0.550$, $R^2 = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$) and virtual team effectiveness ($B = 0.542$, $\beta = 0.542$, $R^2 = 0.294$, $p < 0.001$). Psychological safety remained a positive predictor when inclusive leadership was controlled. The indirect effect was 0.184 (95% bootstrap CI [0.110, 0.274]), indicating partial mediation. Organizations can support digital collaboration by combining accessible leadership with clear communication norms, constructive responses to mistakes, and safe channels for employee voice.

Keywords: leader accessibility; interpersonal risk; hybrid work; digital collaboration; employee voice; mediation

I. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Virtual and hybrid arrangements have altered how employees coordinate interdependent work, solve problems, and sustain relationships. Digital communication can widen access to work, yet it also limits nonverbal cues and informal exchanges that help employees interpret one another's intentions. Large-scale evidence shows that remote work can make collaboration networks more static and siloed, with less synchronous communication across organizational boundaries (Yang et al., 2022). Individual experiences are similarly uneven: productivity, engagement, and stress during work from home depend on job demands and the resources available to each employee (Galanti et al., 2021). Technology therefore enables virtual work but does not, by itself, secure effective collaboration.

Virtual team effectiveness concerns more than task completion. Effective teams achieve acceptable results, preserve their capacity to work together, and support a viable member experience (Hackman, 2002). In distributed settings, these outcomes also depend on role clarity, reliable coordination, trust, adaptability, and purposeful use of communication technologies (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Leaders must establish goals, structure interactions, monitor changing conditions, and attend to the emotional state of the team (Kozlowski et al., 2021). Work design must provide autonomy, support, and opportunities for reflection so that digital tools do not intensify fragmentation (Klonek & Parker, 2021).

Inclusive leadership offers a relational resource for meeting these demands. It is expressed through leader openness to input, availability when assistance is needed, and accessibility across status or location boundaries. The construct extends beyond demographic representation because leaders can strengthen or weaken inclusion through daily signals of belonging and respect for employee uniqueness (Shore & Chung, 2022). In virtual teams, such signals include inviting dissent, distributing speaking opportunities, responding to requests for clarification, and explaining how employee input informed a decision.

Problem of the Study

The reduction of spontaneous interaction creates an interpersonal problem for virtual teams. Employees must decide whether to disclose uncertainty, admit a mistake, or challenge a proposal without the rich contextual information available in face-to-face work. When those actions are perceived as risky, information can remain hidden until deadlines or quality problems become difficult to manage. Psychological safety addresses this problem by describing a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). It does not imply low performance standards; rather, it permits candid discussion of how those standards can be met.

Although virtual-team research emphasizes technology, trust, identity, and work design, less is known about whether inclusive leadership is associated with a broad measure of team effectiveness through psychological safety. Voice, innovation, or engagement cannot be treated as equivalents of virtual team effectiveness, which also includes quality, timeliness, coordination, adaptability, member satisfaction, and team viability. The practical problem is consequently not only whether leaders are supportive, but whether their openness and accessibility are linked to the conditions through which distributed teams perform and remain sustainable.

Research's State of the Art

Recent evidence consistently links inclusive leadership with constructive employee behavior through psychological mechanisms. Psychological safety mediated the association of inclusive leadership with nurse voice and error reporting (Lee & Dahinten, 2021), and it also explained innovative performance in a multilevel model (Li & Tang, 2022). Research on employee voice further shows that psychological safety and affective commitment can form sequential pathways from inclusive leadership (Fatoki, 2024). These findings identify leader behavior as a source of information about whether speaking up will be treated as a contribution or a threat.

Evidence from remote and hybrid employees makes that mechanism particularly relevant to the present context. Mohase et al. (2025) found that psychological safety mediated the association between inclusive leadership and employee voice among remote and hybrid workers. Yet voice is an individual behavior, whereas virtual team effectiveness reflects collective task processes and outcomes. Reviews of virtual leadership continue to emphasize trust building, shared identity, and integration across multiple leadership perspectives (Badrinarayanan, 2024; Greimel et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2024), while practical scholarship identifies explicit interaction norms as a basis for psychological safety in virtual teams (Lechner & Tobias Mortlock, 2022).

Inclusive leadership may also operate through pathways other than psychological safety. Leader access can accelerate clarification and resource allocation; inclusive decision processes can improve information coverage; and consistent treatment can strengthen trust. Virtual-team scholarship emphasizes the need to put the team, rather than technology alone, at the center of distributed collaboration (Gilson et al., 2021). Leaders also help establish early trust before members accumulate extensive interaction histories (Dinh et al., 2021). A partial, rather than complete, mediation pattern is therefore theoretically plausible.

Related studies reinforce this multimechanism view. Inclusive leadership has been associated with collective voice across group faultlines (Chen et al., 2023), individual voice under varying justice perceptions (Qi et al., 2023), voice through psychological empowerment (Younas et al., 2023), and employee voice motivation (Jolly & Lee, 2021). It has also been linked with work engagement through psychological safety and trust in the leader (Siyal, 2023). Earlier work identified psychological safety as a mechanism connecting inclusive leadership with involvement in creative tasks (Carmeli et al., 2010). Together, these studies support a model in which leader inclusiveness shapes both interpersonal risk and broader coordination processes.

Gap Study and Objective

The literature does not warrant a claim that either inclusive leadership or psychological safety is new. The unresolved issue is more specific: whether psychological safety statistically carries part of the association between inclusive leadership and a multidimensional assessment of virtual team effectiveness. Addressing this issue links inclusive-leadership research with virtual-team research while distinguishing the total, direct, and indirect associations within one model.

This study therefore examined whether inclusive leadership predicted psychological safety and virtual team effectiveness, whether psychological safety predicted virtual team effectiveness after inclusive leadership was controlled, and whether the indirect association through psychological safety was statistically different from zero. Because the data were collected at one point in time, the analysis was designed to test predictive associations rather than establish temporal or causal order.

Hypothesis Development

Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety

Leader openness and availability provide social information about which behaviors are accepted within a team. When questions, dissent, and the disclosure of errors receive fair and constructive responses, employees can infer that interpersonal risk is manageable. This inference should be especially consequential in virtual settings, where members have fewer informal opportunities to repair misunderstandings. Inclusive leadership is therefore expected to be positively associated with psychological safety.

H1: *Inclusive Leadership positively predicts Psychological Safety.*

Inclusive Leadership and Virtual Team Effectiveness

Accessible leaders can shorten clarification delays, coordinate interdependent tasks, and draw on information distributed across locations. Equal opportunities to contribute can also improve decision quality and commitment to implementation. These processes suggest a positive statistical association between inclusive leadership and virtual team effectiveness.

H2: *Inclusive Leadership positively predicts Virtual Team Effectiveness.*

Psychological Safety and Virtual Team Effectiveness

Psychological safety makes it easier to disclose obstacles, request assistance, and challenge assumptions before coordination failures become costly. In distributed work, timely disclosure is particularly important because each member may hold information that others cannot directly observe. A safe interpersonal climate should therefore be associated with stronger team effectiveness even when the leader's inclusiveness is statistically controlled.

H3: *Psychological Safety positively predicts Virtual Team Effectiveness after controlling for Inclusive Leadership.*

The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety

Inclusive leadership can reduce perceived interpersonal risk, which in turn can support candid communication, learning from errors, and adaptive coordination. At the same time, leaders can influence effectiveness directly through goal setting, resource allocation, and trust building. The hypothesized mediation therefore does not require the direct association to disappear.

H4: *Psychological Safety mediates the association between Inclusive Leadership and Virtual Team Effectiveness.*

II. METHOD

Type and Design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. All variables were measured from the same respondents at one point in time, making the design suitable for estimating covariance and regression-based predictive associations. The design does not establish temporal precedence and cannot, on its own, support causal conclusions.

The analytical model specified Inclusive Leadership (IL) as the predictor, Psychological Safety (PS) as the mediator, and Virtual Team Effectiveness (VTE) as the outcome. The direct association between IL and VTE and the indirect association through PS were estimated within a regression-based mediation framework.

Data and Data Sources

The source population comprised employees in the Special Capital Region of Jakarta who worked in virtual or hybrid teams and used digital media to coordinate with colleagues and leaders. Because the size of this dispersed population was not known, the source study applied the Lemeshow formula with a 95% confidence level, $p = 0.50$, and a 7% margin of error. The resulting minimum was 196, which was rounded to an achieved sample of 200 respondents.

The employee was the unit of analysis. The source record did not provide a complete recruitment protocol, sampling-frame description, or respondent profile. These omissions limit assessment of coverage, self-selection, and the representativeness of the achieved sample.

Data Collection Technique

Data were obtained through a structured questionnaire using a five-point response scale. Inclusive Leadership was measured with nine positively keyed items (IL1–IL9) representing leader openness, availability, and accessibility. Psychological Safety was measured with seven items. PS1R, PS3R, and PS6R were reverse scored as 6 minus the original response before the construct mean was calculated.

Virtual Team Effectiveness was measured with eight items (VTE1–VTE8) covering goal achievement, work quality, productivity, timeliness, virtual coordination efficiency, adaptability, member satisfaction, and team viability. Construct scores were calculated as item means after reverse scoring. The source document did not report exploratory factor analysis (EFA) or confirmatory factor analysis (CFA); corrected item-total correlations therefore served only as item-level evidence and were not treated as comprehensive construct-validity evidence.

Data Analysis

Data screening verified the respondent count, the 1–5 response range, reverse scoring, and construct means. Corrected item-total correlations greater than 0.300 were used as a practical item-screening criterion, and Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations summarized the distributions and bivariate associations.

Three regression models tested the hypotheses. Model 1 regressed PS on IL (path a); Model 2 regressed VTE on IL (total path c); and Model 3 regressed VTE simultaneously on IL and PS (direct path c' and path b). The indirect association was calculated as $a \times b$ and evaluated using 5,000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval. Mediation was inferred when the interval did not include zero.

Residual normality was examined with Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Linearity was assessed from the linearity and deviation-from-linearity components; multicollinearity was reviewed using tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF); heteroskedasticity was assessed with the Glejser test; and Durbin-Watson values were used as descriptive indicators of residual independence.

III. RESULTS

Data Quality and Descriptive Results

Screening confirmed 200 complete response records, item scores within the 1–5 range, and correct reversal of PS1R, PS3R, and PS6R. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and internal-consistency estimates. Mean scores were above the midpoint of the response scale, while the observed minima and maxima indicated meaningful variation across respondents.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Construct	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD	α
Inclusive Leadership	200	1.444	5.000	3.553	0.660	0.873
Psychological Safety	200	1.571	5.000	3.521	0.719	0.856
Virtual Team Effectiveness	200	1.375	5.000	3.572	0.660	0.853

Note. N = 200. M = mean; SD = sample standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.853 to 0.873, indicating adequate internal consistency for all three multi-item measures. Table 2 summarizes the corrected item-total correlations. Every item exceeded the 0.300 screening threshold, but this result does not establish the dimensionality, convergent validity, or discriminant validity of the constructs.

Table 2. Item-Analysis Summary

Construct	Items	Corrected item-total r	p	Item-screening result
Inclusive Leadership	9	0.532–0.669	< 0.001	All exceeded 0.300
Psychological Safety	7	0.543–0.702	< 0.001	All exceeded 0.300
Virtual Team Effectiveness	8	0.553–0.646	< 0.001	All exceeded 0.300

Note. Corrected item-total correlations are item-level evidence. EFA and CFA were not reported in the source document.

The regression diagnostics did not indicate material assumption violations. Kolmogorov-Smirnov p-values were 0.198, 0.464, and 0.263 for Models 1–3; the corresponding Shapiro-Wilk values were 0.220, 0.089, and 0.263. All deviation-from-linearity p-values exceeded 0.05 (0.700, 0.810, and 0.311). In Model 3, tolerance was 0.698 and VIF was 1.433. Glejser p-values ranged from 0.359 to 0.706, and Durbin-Watson statistics were 1.747, 2.066, and 2.118.

Bivariate Associations

Table 3 reports the Pearson correlations. Inclusive Leadership was positively associated with Psychological Safety and Virtual Team Effectiveness, and Psychological Safety was positively associated with Virtual Team Effectiveness. The coefficients were similar in magnitude, ranging from 0.531 to 0.550. These associations were statistically significant but do not establish causal direction.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Among the Constructs

Construct	1	2	3
1. Inclusive Leadership	1.000		
2. Psychological Safety	0.550***	1.000	
3. Virtual Team Effectiveness	0.542***	0.531***	1.000

Note. N = 200. ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed).

Regression and Mediation Results

The regression estimates are presented in Table 4. Inclusive Leadership positively predicted Psychological Safety in Model 1 and Virtual Team Effectiveness in Model 2. When both predictors were entered in Model 3, Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety each retained a positive coefficient. The multiple-regression model explained 37.2% of the observed variation in Virtual Team Effectiveness.

Table 4. Regression Models

Model and predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI for B
M1: Constant	1.394	0.234	–	5.963	< 0.001	0.933–1.855
M1: Inclusive Leadership	0.599	0.065	0.550	9.256	< 0.001	0.471–0.726
M2: Constant	1.646	0.216	–	7.625	< 0.001	1.220–2.071
M2: Inclusive Leadership	0.542	0.060	0.542	9.076	< 0.001	0.424–0.660
M3: Constant	1.218	0.222	–	5.496	< 0.001	0.781–1.655
M3: Inclusive Leadership	0.358	0.068	0.358	5.303	< 0.001	0.225–0.492
M3: Psychological Safety	0.307	0.062	0.334	4.943	< 0.001	0.184–0.429

Note. Model 1: outcome = Psychological Safety, $R^2 = 0.302$. Model 2: outcome = Virtual Team Effectiveness, $R^2 = 0.294$. Model 3: outcome = Virtual Team Effectiveness, $R^2 = 0.372$.

The coefficient for Inclusive Leadership decreased from 0.542 in the total-association model to 0.358 after Psychological Safety entered Model 3. Table 5 shows that the estimated indirect association was 0.184, with a bootstrap standard error of 0.042. The 95% bootstrap confidence interval, 0.110–0.274, did not include zero. The direct coefficient remained statistically significant, supporting partial mediation.

Table 5. Bootstrap Mediation Analysis

Path or association	Estimate	Boot SE	95% bootstrap CI	Inference
a: IL $\rightarrow$ PS	0.599	–	0.471–0.726	Positive
b: PS $\rightarrow$ VTE, controlling IL	0.307	–	0.184–0.429	Positive
Total association (c)	0.542	–	0.424–0.660	Positive
Direct association (c')	0.358	–	0.225–0.492	Positive
Indirect association (a $\times$ b)	0.184	0.042	0.110–0.274	Partial mediation

Note. Bootstrap resamples = 5,000; confidence level = 95%. IL = Inclusive Leadership; PS = Psychological Safety; VTE = Virtual Team Effectiveness.

Table 6 consolidates the hypothesis tests. All four hypotheses received statistical support. The wording of the decisions reflects predictive associations in cross-sectional data and should not be read as proof of causal effects.

Table 6. Hypothesis-Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Proposed association	Primary evidence	Decision
H1	IL positively predicts PS	$\beta = 0.550$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H2	IL positively predicts VTE	$\beta = 0.542$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H3	PS predicts VTE after controlling IL	$\beta = 0.334$; $p < 0.001$	Supported
H4	PS mediates the IL-VTE association	Indirect = 0.184; CI 0.110–0.274	Supported; partial

Note. Decisions indicate statistical support in the analyzed sample; they do not establish causality.

DISCUSSIONS

Interpretation of the Principal Findings

The results support a model in which Inclusive Leadership is associated with Virtual Team Effectiveness through both direct and indirect statistical pathways. Leader openness, availability, and accessibility predicted greater Psychological Safety, and both constructs retained positive coefficients in the multiple-regression model. The partial mediation pattern is consistent with the view that interpersonal safety matters, while leadership also influences coordination through additional mechanisms.

The association between Inclusive Leadership and Psychological Safety aligns with research showing that leader responses shape whether employees disclose concerns and errors (Lee & Dahinten, 2021; Li & Tang, 2022). In virtual work, these responses are unusually salient because employees cannot always rely on facial expressions, informal conversations, or immediate repair of ambiguous messages. A predictable response to questions and mistakes can therefore function as a recurring signal that candor will be treated as useful information.

Inclusive Leadership also predicted Virtual Team Effectiveness independently of Psychological Safety. The remaining direct coefficient may reflect faster clarification, more complete information sharing, better allocation of speaking opportunities, or stronger trust in the leader. This interpretation is consistent with work emphasizing that virtual teams still require active leadership of goals, interaction patterns, and trust (Dinh et al., 2021; Gilson et al., 2021). The data do not identify which of these mechanisms accounts for the direct coefficient, so they should be examined rather than assumed in future models.

Psychological Safety predicted Virtual Team Effectiveness after Inclusive Leadership was controlled. This finding is plausible because distributed members frequently hold information that is not visible to others. If

employees delay reporting a dependency problem or avoid asking for help, the team may discover the issue only near a deadline. A safe interpersonal climate supports earlier disclosure, task reallocation, and collective learning. It consequently complements, rather than relaxes, performance standards.

The indirect association extends evidence on voice and innovation to a broader team outcome. Prior studies linked inclusive leadership and psychological safety with voice, error reporting, and innovative performance (Fatoki, 2024; Lee & Dahinten, 2021; Mohase et al., 2025). The present results show that the same mechanism is statistically relevant when the outcome encompasses quality, timeliness, coordination, adaptability, satisfaction, and viability. The cross-sectional design, however, leaves reverse and reciprocal interpretations open: effective teams may also evaluate their leaders more favorably and develop stronger psychological safety.

Novelty and Contribution

The study's contribution is contextual and integrative rather than a claim that its constructs are previously unknown. It connects inclusive-leadership research with a multidimensional assessment of virtual team effectiveness and separates the total, direct, and indirect statistical associations in one model. This framing moves beyond treating employee voice as the terminal outcome and examines how interpersonal risk may relate to a wider set of team processes and results.

The partial mediation result also refines the theoretical account. Psychological Safety explains part, but not all, of the association between Inclusive Leadership and Virtual Team Effectiveness. This finding is consistent with a multimechanism model that may include trust, psychological empowerment, shared-team identification, and coordination clarity (Shi et al., 2024; Younas et al., 2023). Future studies can test these mechanisms as parallel or sequential mediators with temporally ordered data.

At the measurement level, the item-total and reliability results provide initial support for consistent scores in this sample, not a complete validation of the constructs. Stating this boundary is part of the contribution because it distinguishes item screening from evidence about dimensionality and construct distinctiveness.

Limitations and Future Study

The cross-sectional design prevents firm conclusions about temporal order or causality. All constructs were self-reported by the same respondents at the same time, which creates susceptibility to common-method variance, consistency motives, and general evaluations of the organization. Longitudinal, multisource, and experimental designs are needed to determine whether changes in leader behavior precede changes in psychological safety and team effectiveness.

The source record did not provide a complete recruitment protocol, sampling technique, response rate, or demographic profile. Generalization beyond the observed respondents is therefore limited. Subsequent research should report sector, organizational level, team tenure, work arrangement, virtuality intensity, and response patterns, and should use nested analyses when employees are clustered within teams.

EFA and CFA were not available, and corrected item-total correlations cannot confirm construct validity. Future measurement work should examine factor structure, convergent and discriminant validity, invariance across work arrangements, and predictive validity. Additional models should incorporate job demands, technology quality, team interdependence, trust, empowerment, and objective or supervisor-rated outcomes.

Implications and Suggestions

Organizations can translate the findings into interaction routines rather than relying on general statements about inclusion. Virtual leaders can establish predictable consultation windows and reasonable response-time expectations, begin meetings by inviting obstacles and risks, distribute speaking turns, and provide asynchronous channels for members who need more time to formulate input. Decision records should show what was considered and why a proposal was accepted or declined.

Responses to mistakes should separate facts, consequences, and corrective action before assigning accountability. This approach makes it possible to preserve standards while reducing avoidable humiliation. Teams should also agree on communication norms covering context in messages, documentation of decisions, meeting-free periods, escalation routes, and appropriate use of synchronous and asynchronous channels.

Leadership development can use simulations of virtual meetings in which leaders practice inviting dissent, responding to bad news, and preventing domination by highly vocal members. Psychological-safety assessments should protect confidentiality and be used to improve team practices, not to identify or blame individuals. Safe employee-voice channels require visible follow-up; a channel without response can deepen rather than reduce distrust.

These suggestions should be combined with sound work design. Inclusive behavior cannot compensate for unclear roles, chronic overload, inadequate staffing, or unreliable technology. The practical implication is therefore a joint investment in interpersonal conditions and the structural resources required for virtual collaboration.

IV. CONCLUSION

Among 200 employees working in virtual or hybrid teams, Inclusive Leadership positively predicted Psychological Safety and Virtual Team Effectiveness, while Psychological Safety predicted Virtual Team Effectiveness after Inclusive Leadership was controlled. The bootstrap interval supported an indirect association through Psychological Safety, and the remaining direct coefficient indicated partial mediation. The findings suggest that leader openness, availability, and accessibility are relevant social resources in digital collaboration because they are associated with a safer climate for disclosing risks, learning from mistakes, and requesting assistance. Organizations should combine these behaviors with explicit communication norms, equitable opportunities to contribute, and accountable follow-up. Because the evidence is cross-sectional and self-reported, it supports statistical association rather than causal proof; temporally ordered and multisource research is required before stronger causal claims can be made.

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