



‘What’s in it for us?’ How Inclusive Behavior Benefits Interpersonal Communication at Work¹

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how inclusive behavior affects communication on an interpersonal level while presenting a perspective on how these effects are created and obtained. We present our findings through a multiple case study design of the positive communication benefits attributed to inclusive behaviors while generating a better understanding of how and when these benefits occur. This contribution could help organizations identify the value of practicing inclusion and guide them toward acquiring the benefits of inclusive behavior. The article also suggests that informal learning plays a substantial role in reaping interpersonal benefits due to the practice of inclusive behavior in work-related settings.

KEYWORDS

communication / inclusive behavior / informal learning / work inclusion

Introduction

Research in the field of work inclusion has garnered considerable attention in recent years, focusing on the benefits of inclusion for individuals from traditionally marginalized groups, spanning various aspects such as health, performance, and engagement (Shore et al. 2018). One area that has been underexplored is the influence of work inclusion on organizational processes and outcomes, particularly the impact on those practicing inclusive behavior (Cho & Mor Barak 2008; Chung et al. 2021; Hwang & Hopkins 2015). While the term *inclusive behavior* lacks a widely accepted definition, it is often associated with related concepts such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and prosocial behavior, which denote actions that benefit an organization, as well as its groups and individuals (Penner et al. 2005, 2014). For the purposes of the present article, inclusive behavior will be defined as the actions of individuals aimed at cultivating an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and appreciated, with the potential to influence day-to-day interactions and the immediate social environment.

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Existing studies have primarily concentrated on the positive effects of inclusion on individuals with diversity characteristics at risk of labor market exclusion, thus overlooking the influence of inclusive behaviors within their work environments and the subsequent impact on group dynamics, which has led to a notable gap in the inclusion literature. To address this gap, the present article draws upon qualitative interview data from employees and leaders in three Norwegian companies to examine how practices of work inclusion can enhance interpersonal communication. The Norwegian context is of particular interest due to its low unemployment rate juxtaposed with a high percentage of the population being on disability benefits and the corresponding percentage of GDP allocated to these benefits; this sets Norway apart from other Nordic countries and emphasizes the significance of exploring the beneficial outcomes of inclusive behavior within this specific context (OECD 2024). Furthermore, the concept of inclusive behavior, as described by Nelissen et al. (2016, p. 468), encompasses extra-role behavior aimed at benefiting people with disabilities in the workplace.

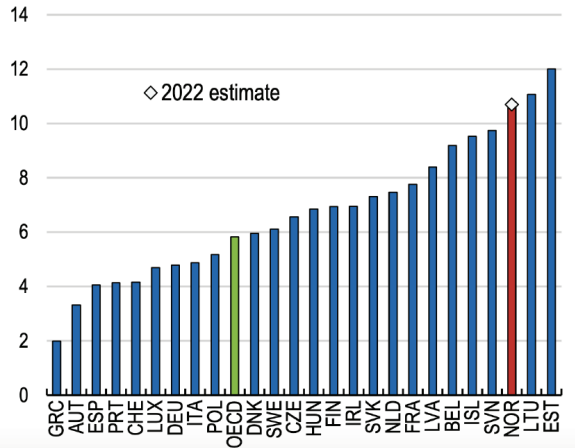


Figure 1 Disability benefits recipients, % of population aged 20–64 years.

Courtesy of OECD (2024).

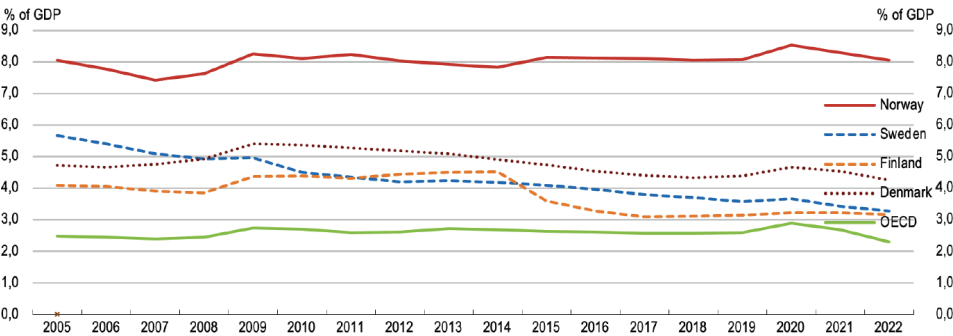


Figure 2 Public spending on sickness and disability.

Courtesy of OECD (2024).



Within the Norwegian context, the connection between government initiatives and work inclusion is central to implementing the national inclusive approach via specific initiatives such as the *IA-agreement 2019–2024* (regjeringen.no, 2022) and the *Employers' Equality Responsibility Act* [*Arbeidsgivers aktivitetsplikt (ARP)*], as described in the *Law on Equality and Anti-Discrimination* (2017, §26). These government regulations and initiatives aim to create security and increased opportunities for those vulnerable to exclusion from the labor market. However, there is little evidence suggesting that these policies are making Norway better than similar countries in the field of work inclusion (OECD 2019, 2024). There is also a need for more research on work inclusion efforts in Norway as a complementary process between organizational motives and employee behavior (Enehaug et al. 2022). According to Wolfgruber et al. (2022, p. 1856), a less-explored part of inclusion literature aims at the 'scholarship on inclusion/exclusion in organizations that foreground communication and interaction'. They further stated that the role of communication has been largely neglected in studies examining factors that create and maintain an inclusive work environment. Wolfgruber et al. (2022) found that formal interpersonal communication (understood as communication about work-related subjects) is important for developing a highly inclusive workplace. Other studies have investigated the effect that communication has on inclusive work environment and the feeling of inclusion among employees with diversity characteristics (see, e.g., Caidor & Coreen 2018; Mor Barak 2022; Trittin & Schoeneborn 2017). However, even though the literature on communication and work inclusion is growing, most studies have focused on the beneficial outcomes of individuals with diversity characteristics, thus underplaying the potential benefits related to the rest of an organization's workforce. While several studies have examined how communication affects inclusion from the perspective of employees with diversity characteristics, there is a lack of research into how employees and their communication are affected by the practice of their own inclusive behavior. Our article aims to fill this research gap.

Based on this introduction, our research question is:

How is communication in organizations affected by the practice of inclusive behavior?

We specifically look at the *interpersonal level* at which inclusive behaviors affect communication in work settings. Interpersonal communication refers to 'the exchange of messages, verbal and nonverbal, between people, regardless of the relationship they share. (...) Thus, interpersonal communication includes the exchange of messages in all sorts of relationships, ranging from functional to casual to intimate' (Guerrero et al. 2017, p. 12). This definition not only comprises how communication is affected by individual inclusive behavior, but also considers the impact on the communicative climate in their respective work groups. We emphasize the duality within the term *interpersonal*, where individuals not only act independently but also as part of a broader collective context. Therefore, we examine how inclusive behavior affects communication between the communicating individuals and their associated work groups.

While topics on inclusion and exclusion are fairly consistent across nations and cultures, it is beneficial, within inclusive studies, to define who is vulnerable within the context being investigated. When identifying vulnerable groups within our context, our primary focus draws on Frøyland's (2015) research, which highlights how individuals with non-Western cultural backgrounds, physical disabilities, sensory impairments,

and/or a history of mental illness are at the highest risk of exclusion from the Norwegian labor market, despite their abilities and qualifications. These groups will further be referred to as employees with diversity characteristics. As our focus is not on evaluating specific inclusive approaches toward employees with specific characteristics, and because we also want to ensure the anonymity of our respondents, we will mention them as a group without referring to any specific characteristics.

Using in-depth interviews across three different organizations where work inclusion is a formalized part of the organization's strategy, we investigated the benefits of performing inclusive behavior toward employees with a heightened risk of work exclusion. The respondents were divided into two groups: *leaders* with staff responsibility for colleagues with diversity characteristics, and employees who are *co-workers* within the same work groups as colleagues with diversity characteristics but without staff responsibility.

Theoretical framework

Inclusive behavior and communication

Work inclusion can be defined as 'providing real opportunities for equal access, possibilities for belonging and contributing, and career prospects through organizational and managerial practices' (Roberson 2006). Work inclusion is a multi-faceted concept that embodies individual or group experiences, behavioral patterns, leadership approaches, collective norms and practices, behaviors, or a value at various levels, ranging from personal to societal (Ferdman 2013). According to Colella and Bruyère (2011), inclusive behavior is evidenced when individuals receive acceptance and assistance and are treated as equals by their peers. A precondition for successful inclusion is that the included individuals are allowed to maintain their uniqueness and are regarded as members of the group (Randel et al. 2018; Shore et al. 2011). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, this has been treated as a precondition from an individual perspective, which is specifically applicable to the individual being included. According to Brewer's Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), uniqueness is also a precondition for gaining positive effects at a group level (Brewer 1991). However, the inclusion literature focuses mainly on the individual level, specifically on individuals with diversity characteristics and their benefits from inclusive practices. There has been scant research on the indirect impacts of work inclusion on interpersonal or group dynamics (Gewurtz et al. 2021; Tompa et al. 2021). Due to this gap in inclusion research, Randel (2023) suggested that it is necessary to uncover positive inclusion-related outcomes to reduce the uncertainty level connected to implementing inclusive policies in organizations. Randel (2023) also noted the need for a deeper understanding of what contributes to an organization's more inclusive climate. Risberg and Corvellec (2022) argued that working toward a set end in diversity-related areas is often counterproductive; instead, they suggested focusing on the aspect of *trying* when attempting to make diverse workgroups thrive. They claimed that focusing on trying, implying continuous evaluation and enhancement, allows for more room for adjustment because of the inherent room for different approaches, which also makes room for learning from past failures when implementing, developing, and enhancing inclusive behaviors and climates.

Modern organizations are increasingly structured around teams and work groups (Anderson et al. 2014). Correspondingly, research on interpersonal communication for effective group performance has expanded. For example, foundational research following this shift points to more information sharing, and that openness to information sharing is positively related to job performance (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2011).

Further, communication can either be a facilitator or an obstacle in developing an inclusive work environment (Wolfgruber et al. 2021). Wilhoit Larson et al. (2022) discussed the importance of communication and noted that communication has a substantial role in both inclusive and exclusive behavior in organizations. An example of this is Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014), who pointed out that successfully including workers with unique needs requires clear communication and acknowledgment of their needs. Thus, work inclusion can improve recognition of individuals in the workgroup and more effective communication (Frøyland & Spjelkavik 2014). Closer alignment between work inclusion and communication may lead to a greater latitude for openly expressing opinions and contributing to more constructive interactions within workgroups (Jensen Larsen et al. 2024). However, there is still a need to improve our understanding of how work inclusion affects communication and the communication skills of those practicing inclusive behavior (Wilhoit Larson et al. 2022).

Informal learning in interpersonal settings

Organizational learning can be defined as a process of gaining knowledge through experience, which leads to changes in beliefs and behavior within the organization (Argote 2011). It is the individuals within the organization that enable organizational learning. However, the knowledge that the individuals obtain must be embedded in the organization to say that organizational learning has occurred (Filstad 2022). This requires knowledge to be created, acquired, and transferred (Argote 2011).

The learning process in organizations can occur through formal learning, such as training programs and courses, but is more often a result of informal learning through practice (Filstad 2022). Loham (2005) defined informal learning as activities that employees initiate in the workplace that involve the expenditure of physical, cognitive, or emotional effort and result in the development of professional knowledge and skills. According to Manuti et al. (2015), informal learning often occurs in situations that are not usually intended for learning, but are instead the result of evolving activities, including group problem-solving, hypothesis testing, mentoring, or coaching. Marsick and Volpe (1999, cited in Marsick and Watkins 2001, p. 28) summarized the characteristics of informal learning, based on the research, as (1) integrated into our daily routines, (2) triggered by an internal or external jolt, (3) not highly conscious, (4) haphazard and influenced by chance, (5) an inductive process of reflection and action, and (6) linked to the learning of others.

Risberg and Corvellec's (2002) perspective highlights the role of trying and testing new behavior in an inclusion context. By doing so, individuals gain learning experiences that may lead to an adjustment in attitudes and behavior patterns. Being willing to try, test, and adjust suggests that the individual's motivation is a necessary enabler in this learning context. This resonates with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory,



which posits that individuals are more motivated to learn and engage in activities when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Most research on organizational learning, informal learning, and communication has focused on communication as an antecedent of organizational learning [see, e.g., Argote et al. (2021) for an overview]. We found little research on how informal learning in the workplace can contribute to evolving communication skills and none on how inclusive behavior in the workplace can function as an informal learning arena for practicing and enhancing communication skills.

Study sample

As the present study was built as a multiple-case study design, we adopted Yin’s (2014) recommendation of using fewer than five cases within a study. The sample size of respondents depends on the scope of the study and the nature of the topic, in addition to the level of data saturation that occurs (Boddy 2016). Given the scope of the present study and the nature of the topic of work inclusion, we primarily sought a deep understanding of different group members within the same group structures. Therefore, we prioritized depth represented by the length of each interview rather than a larger quantity of respondents. We also saw data saturation across samples and cases within the number of interviews conducted. The data primarily consists of interviews of two sample groups within three different cases: employees holding direct leadership roles responsible for colleagues with diversity characteristics (N = 8), and employees working alongside colleagues with diversity characteristics at the same hierarchical level within the organization (N = 7). Table 1 shows a list of the respondents and their roles as leaders or co-workers. Their labels are structured as a letter to place them within their case organization (A, B, or C), followed by an acronym of their role in relation to their colleagues with diversity characteristics (L or CW), and a number given by the chronologic order in which the interviews were conducted in within their respective cases (1 to 6). The cases were selected based on the criteria of being part of the Norwegian private sector and having a formalized strategy for inclusion within their own organization. As we searched within this context for inclusive behavior and the potential benefits for those performing it, we concluded that the chances of encountering examples of such behavior were higher and easier to connect to such potential benefits than if there was no formalized strategy on inclusion. Each interview length varied between 50 minutes and 3 hours.

Case descriptions

Case A takes place within a large Scandinavian banking firm that has around 30,000 employees worldwide. The company had approximately 10 million registered customers in 2022 and views itself as a socially responsible actor by, among other things, accommodating its own employees with reduced working capacity. According to official statements from the organization, the company strives to contribute to social responsibility within its own organizational walls by taking great care and facilitating its own employees if they experience something that affects their working capacity or their conditions

Table I List of respondents

List of respondents	Role
Case A	
ACW1	Co-worker
AL2	Leader
ACW3	Co-worker
AL4	Leader
Case B	
BCW1	Co-worker
BCW2	Co-worker
BL3	Leader
BL4	Leader
BL5	Leader
BCW6	Co-worker
Case C	
CL1	Leader
CL2	Leader
CL3	Leader
CCW4	Co-worker
CCW5	Co-worker

to maintain their capacity. The Case A organization currently has no clear strategy to actively include people from different groups in its organization. It builds its rationale according to the current framework of the law, with a specific emphasis on the *Working Environment Act* (Arbeidsmiljøloven 2005). The respondents in Case A consisted of two leaders (AL2 and AL4) and two co-workers (ACW1 and ACW3).

Case B is a Norwegian communication and technology company conducting business on several continents. It employs 16,000 people in Norway and has a customer base of approximately 100 million customers worldwide. Case B positions its approach to work inclusion somewhere between government and company responsibilities. For more than 25 years, the company has collaborated with the government by offering training and learning facilities for individuals with reduced work capacity or individuals who are not familiar with the Norwegian labor market. This program seeks to build competence based on the participant's current skill sets and preferences, enabling them to participate in the Norwegian labor market. The participants receive work training and experience from participating in the Case B organization and are eligible to apply for jobs within the Case B organization, but are not guaranteed a job there. Participants are also assisted in job searches to provide them with better opportunities to obtain a job after the program has ended. The respondents in Case B consisted of three leaders (BL3, BL4, and BL5) and three co-workers (BCW1, BCW2, and BCW6). BCW1, BL4, and BL5 work within the inclusion program, while BCW2, BL3, and BCW6 work in other parts of the company, although they are strongly linked to the inclusive program.



Case C is a retail company with 90 separate stores in Norway, with its head office in another Scandinavian country. The company actively hires employees who are vulnerable to exclusion from the labor market, giving them opportunities for secure jobs by focusing more on the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities. The more vulnerable employees, who are usually employed through the Norwegian Labor and Welfare (NAV) program, are hired on the same terms as every other employee, except that they have a longer trial period. This provides the opportunity to learn directly from the environment in which the employees are working. There is an emphasis on tailoring each employee’s work task to suit and assist each employee, making positions more fluid and manageable for the employees. The Case C company also claims that this approach provides leaders with higher flexibility to create more inclusive environments. There are three leaders (CL1, CL2, and CL3) and two co-workers (CCW4 and CCW5) within the group of respondents from Case C, where all but CL3 work in the same store facility. CL3 is connected to this facility without having that as their main work location.

The semi-structured interview guide used in this study was divided into two sections. The first section is open and exploratory, drawing upon inductive principles by featuring open-ended questions about the general impact of inclusive behavior on individuals. The second section is more deductive and more closely tied to themes related to potential outcomes of work inclusion based on the framework presented in Figure 1, focusing on communication and its relation to inclusive behavior. This interview structure is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the predefined themes while also uncovering additional themes relevant to inclusive behavior in the workplace. Each interview was conducted either via video meetings or by meeting respondents physically.

Analysis

Framework method analysis (Gale et al. 2013) was used as the primary analysis approach because of its suitability for both inductive and deductive thematic analyses. Our adaptation of this procedure involved three stages. The first stage encompassed transcription and familiarization with the data. In the second stage, we conducted coding and applied a thematic framework. During this phase, we identified codes and categorized them into themes. This process, which Gale et al. (2013) referred to as ‘charting’, seeks to strike a balance between simplifying the data and preserving the original meanings and essence of the interviewees’ words. The third stage involved interpretation and formulation. Throughout this process, we recognized that understanding qualitative data involves more than just identifying patterns; it also involves assessing the significance and dynamics of issues and seeking a coherent structure rather than a multitude of evidence, as noted by Ritchie and Spencer (2002). Consequently, our findings are presented in a manner that underscores their analytical relevance to the research questions.

Findings

This chapter uses the overarching themes of inclusive behavior, communication, and informal learning and how these themes interact and affect each other. Despite being

within the same frame of inclusion within a Norwegian sector, the cases in this study present a diverse contextual and structural context in relation to each other, so we looked at the cases separately in a descriptive manner. Within each case, we separated the differences between leaders and co-workers, as shown in Table 1. We asked the respondents how they see their own communication at work, communication skills, and general social climate in their organization, and how these things have changed over time, implicitly, and how inclusive behavior has affected their communication. Respondents were also asked whether there had been any change concerning their colleagues' ways of communicating in work settings. We present the analysis by looking at the overarching themes of communicative benefits due to inclusive behavior and the significance of informal learning arenas and situations facilitating the emergence of such benefits. Due to the contextual differences within the cases, we present our findings along the lines of the main themes separately within each case before summing up the main findings as grounds for the following discussion.

Case A

Leaders

In Case A, all respondents pointed out that communication plays a significant part in their individual approaches to inclusion. Leaders AL2 and AL4 are focused on the inherent strengthening power within communication, especially their own communication. AL2 highlighted that leaders who express good communication skills build trust and create a sense of psychological safety. While AL4 agreed with these claims, the two leaders differ in how they see their own communication skills as being affected by practicing inclusive behavior:

Well, from a communication perspective ... Of course, there's something about being in those situations with employees that requires leaders to choose their words carefully to some extent. What to say, what not to say. But I don't think general communication has changed, not in that sense. (AL2)

Yes, I believe it has (been positively affected). I am very clear about what I say and what I don't say. I am very conscious of building trust, at least avoiding creating mistrust. (AL4)

AL4 also mentioned that there has been a change in their colleagues' way of communicating. As a consequence of inclusive behavior and adapted communication with co-workers with diversity characteristics, the communication and interaction between other co-workers have also developed toward a more respectful and empathetic form:

Well, at least there's a process where I know that people have stopped speaking ill of each other to the extent they did before. They've started treating each other more kindly. Some individuals have changed for the better. I can clearly see that some have smoothed out their rough edges, at least begun to communicate in a better way. (AL4)



Leaders in Case A seem to have conflicting views regarding whether they see positive changes in their work group due to inclusive behavior. While AL2 said that there is no substantial change in communication, AL4 claimed the opposite, pointing to a change toward a more kind and prosocial form of communication. However, both leaders reflect on how they communicate but seem to view themselves more as role models in the sense that others have something to learn from them, rather than focus on their own learning and growth in relation to their personal inclusive behavior.

Co-workers

Co-workers ACW1 and ACW3 emphasized the importance of openness and that it is difficult to be understood if they do not – or have no room to – speak about their vulnerabilities. In an inclusion setting, the respondents noted that it is easier to speak of their own vulnerability if/when they see that others are being respected and helped when being open about their vulnerabilities by voicing their struggles. ACW1 pointed out that in a flipped scenario, where colleagues sense that an individual is struggling to cope in work settings without being willing to speak openly about it, speculation can easily occur in the rest of the group. ACW1 said:

It’s about how we communicate, right? It’s just that when you keep something to yourself, it tends to lead to conversations between colleagues, maybe about certain things. And it can get a bit negatively charged, you know. (ACW1)

ACW3 provides another layer by suggesting that positive communication has a self-enforcing effect:

Understanding is created through openness and communication, right? It doesn’t help that I think about it and that we have it in theory if I don’t convey anything. Also, not all employees find it so straightforward. But you need to create a space and a starting point that conveys the situation or challenge, whatever you want to call it. (ACW3)

ACW3 further reflects on how inclusion may foster a better understanding of the differences and needs that not only the included individual, but also all colleagues, may have and carry with them:

It’s about considering each other, showing care, and being aware that it’s not just me in the world. (...) There’s so much that doesn’t show, but there should be a certain level of openness about it. (ACW3)

In summary, Case A respondents made little reference to what they have actually learned and how they might have learned from practicing inclusive behavior. Their reflections are more general in terms of how external factors of inclusion might benefit them rather than actual learning outcomes for themselves. This does not necessarily mean that learning has not occurred. Three out of the four respondents point to enhanced communication skills and level of openness in their work group and attribute this to inclusive behaviors. It appears that interacting with colleagues possessing diversity characteristics has initiated reflection

among some of the respondents, which has affected their perspective-taking, making them aware that trying to understand each other is important, and that they have learned that this understanding is dependent on practicing empathic communication. However, there seems to be a fine line between open communication about self-perceived vulnerabilities that generates positive actions and associations, and communication that is regarded as complaining and making excuses. Where they draw this line seems to relate to the connotations of their statements. Colleagues who speak about their challenges positively and constructively generate more positivity in their work groups and potential for more beneficial takeaways from practicing inclusive behavior. However, it was also mentioned that this line is defined by how people are met, especially by people in leadership positions.

Case B

Leaders

The leaders in Case B (BL3, BL4, BL5) share views about the importance of clear communication, the increased awareness of perception variance, the value of inclusive experience, and that there have been clear changes in communication due to a more collective approach toward inclusiveness. The approach seems largely strategic through empowering others by trusting them through delegation of responsibility, which all leaders in Case B mentioned. BL3 advocated this view, emphasizing that colleagues who are given the responsibility often rise to the challenge, especially when helping others, like in a mentoring role. According to BL3, this also must be in line with a good understanding of what this responsibility is, a sufficient understanding of what is needed to succeed, and that it is in line with the colleague's wishes for their development. BL3 also noted how collaboration and communication with employees with diversity characteristics helped in developing their leadership roles. BL3 claimed that communicative leadership traits, such as storytelling used as an inclusive tool, are a crucial feature. This is presented as learning outcomes due to their commitment to inclusive behavior.

I would say that the significant development for me has been in becoming a better leader, understanding people, and making the team function. It [inclusive behavior] has contributed significantly to my development as a leader. (BL3)

BL3 shared the notion of how work inclusion has affected the climate in the group by bringing in new perspectives and thereby improving the communication norms in the group. One of his examples involves a group where there was some tension and 'the culture wasn't entirely healthy'. Although BL3 noted that there are still challenges connected to this particular group culture, it has improved due to new impulses and perspectives brought into the team by colleagues with diversity characteristics.

Then the person came in, being a bit different and asking different types of questions, it shook things up. I felt the atmosphere becoming easier, and we started seeing things in new ways. (...) In this case, there was a kind of slang that wasn't suitable for the team, and it more or less disappeared when a new person joined. (...) It contributed significantly in a positive direction. (BL3)



BL3 pointed toward the focus on communicating clearly and transparently and how that lays the foundation for a better social climate, making employees more aware of their responsibilities and rights, in addition to the experienced empowerment through better social conditions regarding speaking up for help. BL5 took a more thorough look at the approaches BL3 described and the prerequisites for such approaches to be effective. 'That's what we try to teach our participants because when you're new to a department, you can't read minds; you have to communicate your needs' (BL5).

Co-workers

All of the co-workers in Case B agreed that there has been a clear shift in both their own and other colleagues' communicative skills due to practicing inclusive behaviors. They pointed to several key areas that have been positively affected. BCW1 highlighted the heightened awareness of perception variance within their work group, and that inclusive behavior promotes a clearer understanding of these differences, motivating group members to adopt clearer and more inclusive communication. BCW2 pointed to the link between empathetic and professional communication, identifying inclusive behavior in their group as vital for developing the balance between them. Several co-workers also emphasized the importance of clarity and empathy regarding beneficial communication, something they feel has been enforced both at an individual level and the group level they are associated with.

According to BCW2, work inclusion has led them to take a broader perspective in collaboration and communication with individuals from the internal inclusion program and has helped when communicating about work-related problems, making them more solution-oriented.

You develop as a person and gain empathy. You understand and get a more holistic view of the situation you're in. It also relates to the idea that if conflicts or problems arise, you become more solution-oriented rather than fixating on what's theoretically best or whose fault it is. The experience gained can then be applied in other areas as well. (BCW2)

The above quote shows how interaction with co-workers with diversity characteristics serve as a setting for learning and practicing communicative and collaborative skills, and that these skills also have inherent properties of transferability toward other work-related areas.

BCW6 described a shift in their social climate at work toward more understanding attitudes, perceived through the communication at work.

People are more cautious about what they say and how they talk about other people. They phrase things a bit differently, the language isn't as harsh, and there's a bit more understanding. I think many can easily say things without thinking too much, but they choose their words more carefully if they know that someone is a bit different. It's beneficial, so nothing negative about it. Less shooting from the hip and more thoughtfulness. (BCW6)

According to the respondents, communication in the Case B organization has evolved due to its approach to inclusion and the following inclusion behavior. There is also

a clear trajectory from awareness to action – individuals first become aware of their language and then make active changes to ensure it is more inclusive. This progression signifies a potential shift in organizational climate, attitude, and social norms. The consistent mention of kinder, more careful, and thoughtful communication describes an evolving workplace culture that values understanding and respectful interactions. All of the Case B respondents shared the opinion that clear communication is an important aspect of obtaining a more constructive social climate. More culturally embedded language is used in these settings, which means that these arenas could tend to be less inclusive. Nevertheless, as employees gain more experience in practicing inclusive behavior, they become more aware of how their communication is perceived by others, further enhancing the possibilities for beneficial learning outcomes from work inclusion.

Case C

Leaders

When analyzing the findings in Case C, it was evident that the leaders especially felt reassured that work inclusion in their organization helped them to develop in ways they would not have otherwise:

We bring in people here who we wouldn't have otherwise. I am in contact with people whom I might not have worked with otherwise. We learn from that; we become better at communicating and understanding other people, which also helps with our self-awareness. In that sense, I think it's great that we have a good variety of people here, and I believe it has impacted us as a team. (CL1)

Here, CL1 stresses that working and communicating with co-workers with diversity characteristics provides a learning arena for improving their communication skills and that this further enhances communication skills and relational competencies within the workgroup.

The emphasis on clear communication is a prevalent feature of inclusive behavior, as in other cases. However, the leaders in Case C differ due to their clear emphasis on the listening aspect of communication, which opens the way for more collaboration across hierarchical levels. Leader CL2 put it as follows:

Good communication throughout the whole process is crucial. But if I were to highlight something that could be challenging, it would be the fact that communication happens on the terms of the person *receiving* the communication. If someone doesn't understand what I'm talking about, then I haven't communicated well enough. But that doesn't just apply to people coming in with challenges; it applies to anyone here, really. (CL2)

This approach also represents a notion of openness and respect for one's social surroundings. Also, stating that this is challenging in practice, Leader CL2 acknowledged that things do not always go smoothly, but that the approach is primarily about trying to be inclusive and always practicing, which eventually helps you evolve inclusive skills, like communication.



Experience has shown me that openness leads to more openness and, therefore, generates extremely positive energy in the work environment. (CL3)

Through this statement, Leader CL3 points to the importance of openness and the positive energy that could potentially be released due to the openness characterizing inclusive behavior. CL3 also credited heightened levels of respect for their colleagues for these benefits.

I strongly believe that when I respect people in a different way, it leads to a much more respectful tone in our communication, which, in turn, leads to better interactions. This, in turn, might make us care more about each other, creating a positive spiral. (CL3)

The leaders in Case C were especially eager to talk about how they personally benefitted from practicing inclusive behavior. While leaders in the other two cases focused mostly on their colleagues’ growth, often because of their own inclusive efforts, the leaders in Case C seemed to also reflect more on how this had affected themselves, as exemplified by this quote from CL1:

You learn to adapt quite well. So, yes, it’s individual people that make me feel like I’ve become better at communicating, that’s what I want to say, really. And I’ve managed to apply it to other people later on. When you learn something that was difficult before, you can easily use it later, I think. (CL1)

This quote also serves as an example of how adapting communication when interacting with colleagues with diversity characteristics enhances the leader’s communication skills in meetings with other colleagues, pointing to a situation where learning has been transmitted from one setting to another.

In Case C, leaders emphasized the need for clear and adaptive communication as a cornerstone of inclusive behavior and unlocking benefits due to inclusive behavior. Unlike other scenarios, they highlighted the role of listening and the idea that effective communication hinges on the speaker’s clarity rather than solely the listener’s understanding. This approach reflects a deep respect for varied communication backgrounds. While fostering inclusivity can be challenging, consistent effort in this direction refines both organizational and individual communication abilities. Notably, leaders in Case C not only discussed the growth of their team members but also their personal growth, providing a well-rounded view of the positive impact of inclusive behavior.

Co-workers

The co-workers from Case C seem to agree with their leaders’ statements, highlighting the importance of being open and respectful as part of inclusive behavior and how this way of being has had a positive impact on them. Co-workers CCW4 and CCW5 both stated that they have observed and exhibited inclusive behavior by being understanding and supportive in interaction with co-workers with diversity characteristics. They also emphasized the effect of inclusiveness outside of work, for example, by inviting co-workers out to social events and to the gym. They expressed that inclusive behavior

at work makes it easier to communicate with each other, both in the interaction with co-workers with diversity characteristics, and among co-workers in general.

CCW4 further explained that he felt insecure and introvert during his first period of employment at the company, but that inclusive behavior and friendly, informal communication with co-workers helped him feel a natural part of the workgroup and spiked his self-esteem. He stressed that being in an environment where it feels safe to be himself increased his own awareness and ability to exhibit inclusive behavior and has formed the way he communicates with his co-workers:

Suddenly, I started to develop myself and became more outgoing than I was before I started the job. I was really scared at the beginning, wondering how things would go, finding it challenging to talk to people, you know. It feels so natural for me to be here now. I'm certain that if the environment had been different, I wouldn't have stayed here as long as I have. It's important to me that it's like this. (...) It's all about wanting to be compassionate towards others. I don't want anyone to feel left out. (CCW4)

In summary, leaders in Case C acknowledged that work inclusion has significantly benefited both their personal development and the organizational environment. They stressed the importance of clear, adaptive communication and listening attentively to enhance collaboration across hierarchical levels. This approach, centered on respect and openness, fosters a positive work environment and enhances mutual respect among colleagues, creating a constructive feedback loop. Furthermore, co-workers emphasized the positive psycho-social impact of such an environment. They highlighted the importance of psychological safety, feeling accepted without judgment, and experiencing personal growth in a supportive atmosphere. The focus on inclusivity, especially in informal interactions, leads to a sense of empowerment among employees, contributing to a more inclusive culture overall. This case study reveals that inclusive behavior positively affects both leaders and employees, enhancing communication, respect, and psychological well-being in the workplace.

Summary

The overarching themes of inclusive behavior, communication, and informal learning showcased a robust interplay that enhanced both individual and collective communication skills.

Respondents reported that inclusive behavior contributed to more empathetic, respectful, and transparent communication. Leaders emphasized that inclusive behavior helped them develop better communication skills and foster trust and psychological safety within their teams. This was echoed by co-workers who observed a marked shift toward more supportive and solution-oriented communication, even though the extent of the experienced communicative benefits varied somewhat between the cases.

Informal learning seems to play a crucial role in these improvements. Interaction with colleagues possessing diversity characteristics served as a learning ground, enabling employees to refine their communication strategies. This learning extended beyond direct interactions with diversity-characteristic colleagues, enriching communication with the entire workgroup. Such exposure heightened awareness and



understanding of different perspectives, thus promoting clearer and more thoughtful communication.

Discussion

Based on the findings presented above, the following discussion aims to broaden the perspective by presenting our thoughts and perspectives on the practical and theoretical implications of this study. The discussion follows the lines of our major themes, communication and informal learning, where we observe the communicational benefits of inclusive behavior and how informal learning seems to facilitate these benefits.

Communication

Our data point to the uniqueness of the individual being included in terms of how new perspectives, new communication features, needs, and styles benefit the group that is practicing inclusion. This finding is in line with Shore et al. (2011) and Randel et al.’s (2018) theory that inclusion environments are built by two main components: the combination of valuing individual uniqueness and high levels of perceived belongingness. Accordingly, our findings align with the theoretical underpinnings of inclusive behavior and communication (Wolfgruber et al. 2022). Inclusive behavior, as theorized, does more than just facilitate access and a sense of belonging; it seems to actively reshape how individuals interact with their colleagues. This is evident in the reporting of communication skills, which are interconnected to increased showings of empathy along with heightened awareness of interpersonal dynamics, albeit with variable outcomes across the three cases. The clearest benefit is the heightened notion that communication does not provide meaning before it is interpreted by the receiver. This happens when individuals adjust their communication in ways that consider how the receiver interprets it and actively seek to adjust for misunderstandings or other types of dissonance occurring in interpretations. These benefits not only provide a better internal communication climate but are also beneficial when interacting with others outside one’s own organization, such as customers, suppliers, or regulators.

Based on our findings, the factors that are most likely to facilitate these benefits come down to two main characteristics of the inclusive behavior at hand. First, the element of viewing inclusion as a continuous pursuit is crucial. Comparing the cases in this study shows that openness and willingness to change one’s approach toward others based on their specific needs creates a communication climate based on collaboration, which seemingly heightens the communicational benefits gained from inclusive behavior. This is closely related to the claims of Risberg and Corvellec (2022), which point toward the significance of trying while viewing eventual missteps as learning points. Since both work inclusion and communication are highly context-sensitive, individual cases of inclusion require practice in that specific setting. From the perspective of the included, Frøyland and Spjelkavik (2014) noted the necessity of this claim, but it is also imperative from the perspective of the includers.

Second, the role of leadership is pivotal in facilitating inclusive processes with increased potential for communicational benefits for those practicing inclusion. Leaders

who embrace inclusive behavior not only foster a more inclusive environment but also experience personal growth by enhancing their communication skills. However, our findings suggest that leaders who possess the mindset of seeing inclusion as a continuous pursuit are more likely to spread this growth-enhancing way of thinking to their co-workers. This requires humility, openness, and a certain level of social skills, and, in most situations, it will represent a set of pro-diversity beliefs held by the leader, as described by Randel et al. (2018). These findings also strengthen Randel et al.'s propositions that humility, pro-diversity, and cognitive complexity are positively related to inclusive leadership.

Informal learning

The communication skills in our study seem to develop through a self-reinforcing learning process, whereby the interaction with the included employees functions as a learning platform for practicing new communication skills and behavior. The findings in this study shed light on the transformative impact of informal learning on communication skills in interpersonal settings with included employees. Informal learning emphasizes the importance of learning within the context of real-world tasks and social interactions (Manuti et al. 2015). As mentioned, the present study shows how communication skills can be learned and developed organically within work groups with included employees.

In a formalized inclusion setting, which is the context of our research, group members know they are interacting and communicating with included employees and co-workers. Our findings strongly indicate that this awareness makes leaders and employees more conscious about how to communicate in one-on-one interaction with the included individual, for example, by listening more actively to the person's needs or being more focused on clear and inclusive communication with that individual. Several respondents pointed to the positive outcomes of being more attentive and sensitive to different perspectives in these kinds of interactions. Patterns within our data show that leaders and co-workers then transfer and apply their new knowledge and associated communication skills in the interaction with other co-workers in their work group. This is consistent with how Argote (2011) described the process of organizational learning, which exemplifies how communication skills develop through practical social interactions.

Further, our findings suggest that experiencing the positive outcome of developed communication skills, in both the one-on-one interaction with the included and their related work group, creates a self-enforcing process in which enhanced communication skills are further practiced and refined. The process seems to be fueled, at least in part, by motivation that arises due to the experienced positive effect of the applied communication skills. This is in line with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, which states that individuals are more motivated to learn and engage in activities when they experience competence. Positive outcomes in learning can contribute to a sense of competence, further reinforcing the learning process.

Our findings show that communication skills learned by interaction with the included 'stick' in the work group, and that interpersonal experience with inclusion provides long-term communicational benefits. This indicates that there is a self-enhancing process of developing communication skills that could lead to altered norms within work groups. Norms can be resistant to change, as their function is to provide

employees with a feeling of predictability and stability. However, when circumstances change, norms could change as well (Hogg & Vaughan 2002). Statements from our respondents show how the entry of the included individual changed the status quo in the work group. Interaction with the included individuals led to new impulses and perspectives, thereby changing the communication norms in the workgroup, for example, by enhanced empathic communication and reduced use of slang.

There are variations in terms of how aware and articulated the leaders and co-workers in our data are regarding how interaction with included individuals has developed their own communication skills and those of co-workers. Some respondents make an explicit link between their interactions and evolved communication in both themselves and their surroundings, while the link remains more implicit among others. Nevertheless, the effect of inclusion work on improving communication seems to be present in both leaders and co-workers, as tacit knowledge can be created, acquired, and transferred (Argote 2011). However, one could hypothesize that the benefits that inclusion has on enhanced communication skills will be even higher in work groups where both explicit and tacit knowledge about those benefits are present, as articulated, and shared reflections on the benefits gathered from work inclusion can provide further motivation and attention to the inclusive practices at hand.

Limitations and future research

This study focuses on how the interpersonal practice of inclusive behavior can enhance communication skills in work-related settings. We also point to informal learning as a conditioning factor for these enhanced skills. However, further investigation of possible factors that may condition the effect of inclusive behavior on communication skills would strengthen this research topic. Some of our data suggest that such conditioning factors could be attitudes and expectations toward those being included. Therefore, we would recommend this as a topic for future research, both within the Norwegian context and in other countries.

Potentially, the most significant limitation of this study is that it is based on the perception of individuals where we rely on their inclusive behaviors by their own self-proclaimed record (in addition to the fact that their related workplace has formalized inclusiveness strategies). However, as the interviews in each case are conducted within the same social groups, misconceptions due to this potential pitfall are reduced due to corresponding perceptions of inclusive environments within the cases. Nevertheless, due to the social desirability of being perceived as inclusive, this potential weakness needs to be mentioned regarding this study and the way it is conducted.

We have lightly touched upon other topics where the data indicate beneficial outcomes, such as psychological safety, social climate, and psycho-social work environment. We have mentioned these topics within the context of communication, but they could easily be lifted as independent areas where potential beneficial effects could be found. Therefore, we encourage researchers in our field to take a further look at how performing inclusive behavior affects areas such as psychological safety, social climate, and psycho-social work environment.

A more extensive investigation of the specific market segments in which the case organizations operate could also help us understand the apparent differences in obtained

benefits due to performing inclusive behavior, as well as determine more context-related advantages or disadvantages within different market segments. Research on how individual performances reach beyond the organizational structures, such as whether the levels of internal communication skills would impact the interaction with stakeholders outside the workgroup environment, would be another interesting subject for future research.

To summarize the contributions and the potential road ahead, Table 2 recaps our main findings and links them to their associated theoretical implications, while also providing suggestions for future research.

Table 2 Summary of main findings

Main findings	Theoretical implications	Suggestions for future research
Inclusive behavior could positively affect communication skills	Broadens the scope of explicit benefits of inclusion to include those who perform inclusive behavior and those being included	The implications on factors that are more or less interconnected with communication, such as psycho-social work environment, psychological safety, etc.
Benefits from inclusive behavior are generated through informal learning processes	Strengthening the connection between organizational learning theory and positive outcomes of inclusive behavior	Further investigate the connection between organizational learning and work inclusion
Leaders are crucial in enabling the beneficial effects of inclusive practices in work groups by facilitating and implementing inclusive behavior	Strengthens the literature on inclusive leadership by emphasizing the impact of leaders in relation to inclusion	A closer look into other moderating factors connected to communicational benefits from work inclusion, like attitudes and expectations toward the included, and how leaders could influence this

Conclusion

Considering the role that inclusive behavior plays within organizational settings, this article presents a nuanced exploration of how inclusive behaviors shape and enhance communication within work groups. The findings illuminate the potential for communicational benefits of inclusive behavior fostered mainly by informal learning arenas. By doing so, we broaden the scope of how inclusiveness affects those being invested in it, thus helping to bridge a gap in the D&I literature while laying the ground to motivate individuals to adopt more inclusive behaviors. This study contributes to the existing literature by intertwining the concepts of work inclusion and organizational learning, offering fresh insights into the mechanisms of gaining communicative benefits as a result of practicing inclusive behavior.

Central to our findings are the potential benefits of inclusive behavior dependency on informal learning. Informal learning facilitates the potential for mutually beneficial connections between employees within work-related settings that include individuals with diversity characteristics. Therefore, informal learning is instrumental in nurturing communication skills among group members, promoting a social climate in which empathy, clarity, and active listening are encouraged.



Leadership emerges as a critical element in facilitating and realizing communicational benefits due to inclusive behavior. Leaders who embody inclusivity not only foster a conducive environment for open communication but also report experienced personal growth, underscoring the reciprocal nature of inclusive behavior. This points to the need for leaders to recognize and embrace the potential of informal learning inherent in inclusive behavior.

In conclusion, this study underscores the significance of inclusive behavior in shaping the communicative landscape in work-related settings. By fostering an environment of mutual respect, empathy, and openness, inclusive practices not only enhance communication within groups but also contribute to a more inclusive, engaged, and learning-oriented organizational culture. As such, organizations are encouraged to recognize the intrinsic value of inclusive behavior, not merely as a moral imperative, but as a strategic asset that drives organizational learning and communication excellence.

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