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Exploring the Link Between Inclusive Leadership and Project Success: The Mediating Role of Innovative Behavior

Qiamuddin Rahmat[1]
Bilal Khan[2]
Zargay Takid[3]
Ayaz Khan[4]

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Qiamuddin Rahmat	Power Bridge ICT Services. Email: Qiam.rahmat@yahoo.com
Bilal Khan	Assistant Professor, Department of Management Sciences, Abasyn University Peshawar. Email: rjbilalkhanbk@gmail.com
Zargay Takid	PhD Scholar, University of Haripur Pakistan and Lecturer, Alfalah University, Afghanistan
Ayaz Khan	Khurasan University Jalalabad, Afghanistan

Abstract

The present research focuses on the moderating role of innovative behavior on the relationship between inclusive leadership and project success. Using a survey questionnaire, data were collected from 264 project-based professionals across different organizations and regression analysis along with Hayes' PROCESS macro were used to test the hypothesized relationships. The results show that inclusive leadership enhances project success and that innovative behavior fully mediates the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables. The inclusive leadership creates a culture that allows the employees to be involved in the problem-solving process, which ultimately improves the quality of projects. The current research advances the knowledge on leadership and project management by examining the importance of inclusive leadership in attaining project success through innovation. From the practical perspective, it is recommended that organizations embrace inclusive leadership practices in order to foster innovation and enhance organizational performance. This study contributes to the literature by refining theoretical knowledge and offering practical applications for improving the effectiveness of projects in complex organizations.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Project Success, Innovative Behavior, Project Management

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

In the world of globalization, surge in technologies and dynamism in the market, successful projects hold the key to competitive advantage and organizational sustenance. Project success defined by project scope, time and cost constraints and stakeholder satisfaction is still a broad concept that is a challenge to most organizations (Carvalho & Rabechini Jr., 2017). However, as evidenced from the literature, successful project management incorporates refined project management tools and techniques and the accomplishment of consistent results within the

projects. However, these factors are hindered by misaligned objectives, resource constrains, and the inability to properly unlock the potential of a team (Ahmed et al., 2013). In this regard, the increasing importance of creativity and teamwork calls for understanding of leadership patterns that may be used to create effective teams which will be able to address the challenges of contemporary work.

Project leadership is widely accepted as a key determinant of project performance. Management leadership ensures that goals for a project are in congruity with organizational goals, manages resources well and fosters solidarity amongst the team members (Anantatmula, 2010). Whereas past literature has focused on the authoritative and managerial forms of leadership, the present literature discusses the transformative and inclusionary strategies that would allow team members to actively contribute to the result. Effective leadership practiced in an organization that is sensitive to organizational democracy has been replaced by a new concept known as Inclusive leadership: A new paradigm that opens up, provide equal opportunities and acknowledge individuals' contributions. The other effective practice that is recognizable among central inclusive leaders is development of trust and psychological safety within a group of people, which allows them share their ideas, concerns and asking for help within a group without a risk of being punished or criticized (Carmeli et al., 2010).

Inclusive leadership can be regarded as a critical source of power in determining the project success potential because it takes advantage of the strengths of multiple employees. The active involvement and recognition of employees make them more affiliated to the group, dedicated and supportive to the cause of the project – which are important principles for achieving targeted project goals (Choi et al., 2015). Research literature has revealed that inclusive leadership has a favourable influence on project performance, by enhancing team motivation and cooperation, as well as flexibility (Khan et al., 2020). For example, in the construction and IT sectors when there are critical tasks to complete, inclusive leadership helps to prevent and solve conflicts, fosters creativity, and increases work productivity due to the improved status of teams (Jiang et al., 2023).

One of the ways by which inclusive leadership helps in the achievement of project objectives pertains to encouraging innovation among the people. Creativity or innovative behavior which is the process of coming up with new ideas, utilizing these ideas in organizations, and spreading these ideas throughout an organization is fast becoming a vital determinant of project success (Wu et al., 2023). In complex and rapidly evolving process environments, innovation potential of teams defines their capabilities to adapt to emergent issues, improve in terms of performance and create high-quality outcomes. Fortunately, Gouveia et al, (2021) posited that inclusive leadership facilitates the development of a

supportive context for innovation in the workplace due to the enhancement of trust, self-organizational autonomy, and motivation in workgroups by Zafar et al., (2024). The authors also argued that positive organizational work contexts where team members feel valued and supported encourage creativity, risk taking, and effective team work to solve problems (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi et al., 2017).

In addition, inclusive leadership creates trust and motivation within teams, which, in turn are the foundation for maintaining innovative activity in the long term. Trust at team level that refers to the perceived ability and benevolence of team members – horizontal trust – and trust at organizational level, where subordinates trust their superiors – vertical trust – are some of the important enablers of successful team work and creativity according to Zafar et al. (2024). Such dynamics ensure that not only are new ideas being created but also that they are effectively delivered to create actual project results (Khan et al., 2020). These processes are enabled by inclusive leaders who help employees to demonstrate the right behaviors that are expected in a project and who create environments that support the generation of new ideas.

However, there is still limited understanding of how inclusive leadership and innovative behavior can be implemented in project management in general, particularly in developing contexts. Although some research has established the link between inclusive leadership and project performance, but little research has been done in exploring the factors that mediate this relationship (Khan et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2021). Furthermore, the complexities of global and diverse environments imply that interaction between leadership practices and team processes is essential to enhance project performance.

This research will seek to fill these gaps through exploring the relationship between inclusive leadership and project success with the mediating role of innovative behavior. Thus, the paper extends the literature on leadership and project management and fills the gap by synthesizing the findings of other studies and reporting new empirical findings. Moreover, it provides useful recommendations for project managers who want to improve the performance of their teams and accomplish project goals relying on cooperation and innovation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR

In a study of inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior, Javed et al. (2019) examined the mediating effects of psychological empowerment in organizations in the United Kingdom and Canada. They noted psychological empowerment as a mediator in this relationship. For instance, Choi, Tran, and Kang (2017) observed a significant relationship between inclusive leadership and innovation behavior with employees of Vietnamese telecommunication firms. The result of the study on the nature of inclusive leaders shows that they are easily reachable by subordinates

and very sympathetic to the workers. Such leaders engage with their followers, transform information, communicate with them and even share knowledge with them (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010).

The process of decision making is collaborative and deliberately positive for an inclusive leader. Such leaders make sure that the decisions being made and the voices being heard are in harmony with what all employees envision (Edmondson et al., 2004; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Therefore, workers that get challenged and are encouraged to be involved in decision making have an open door to express their feelings and thoughts to which they experience an imaginative work environment (Lee, 2005).

Inclusive leadership, in particular, seems to prohibit and promote creative work behavior in accordance with research findings. De Jong emphasize that creativity in work activities implies the application of effective ideas, the introduction of ideas, objects and procedures which can be adopted at individual, team or organizational level. Not only does it provide opportunities for the personnel to search for other ways and means but also encourages people convert these idea into practices (Basu & Green, 1997; Carmeli et al., 2010; Sanders et al., 2010; Altunoğlu & Gürsel, 2015).

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT SUCCESS

Leadership has been pointed to as one of the major factors that underpin project success with leadership striving for the inclusion of everyone in the determination of project results. Organizational inclusiveness through open communication and personalized approach followed by leaders and their special involvement in the work of subordinates fosters employee's engagement and promotes their sense of worth (Jiang, Ma, Wang & Jia, 2023). The ability to draw out subordinates, encourage their participation, and empower them to take responsibility for the project results is critical to successful project delivery, which in turn is supported by the creation of an environment of psychological safety by the inclusive leaders.

In their study, Khan et al. (2020) underscore that inclusive leadership is a strong predictor of project success: inclusive leaders improve the team members' morale and ensure they know everyone is accountable for project outcomes. Based on their study they recommend that such leadership enhances individual performance, and organizational goals that are essential in project achievements. Muhammad, Ali, Khalid, Shahzadi, and Javaid (2021) also supported the role of psychological empowering mediating the relationship between inclusive leadership and project success. Employers who follow diversity policies give their workers the chance to gain confidence in their skills, which in turn will enhance their decisions and projects results. In addition, Jiang et al. (2023) also opine that the ILM fosters positive team identification since it promotes voice behaviour and innovation in construction project teams.

These behaviors are important more specifically in the context of large projects which call for innovation and flexibility.

Furthermore, Sürücü, Maslakçı, and Şeşen (2023) also argued that when people have effective leaders who encourage them for performing innovative work related behaviors, it positively impacts on project efficiency and effectiveness. Together, this literature demonstrates that while IL is directly related to project outcomes, it also engenders an organizational climate that fosters cooperation and productivity. Therefore, authors have hypothesized that there is a positive, significant relationship between inclusive leadership and project success.

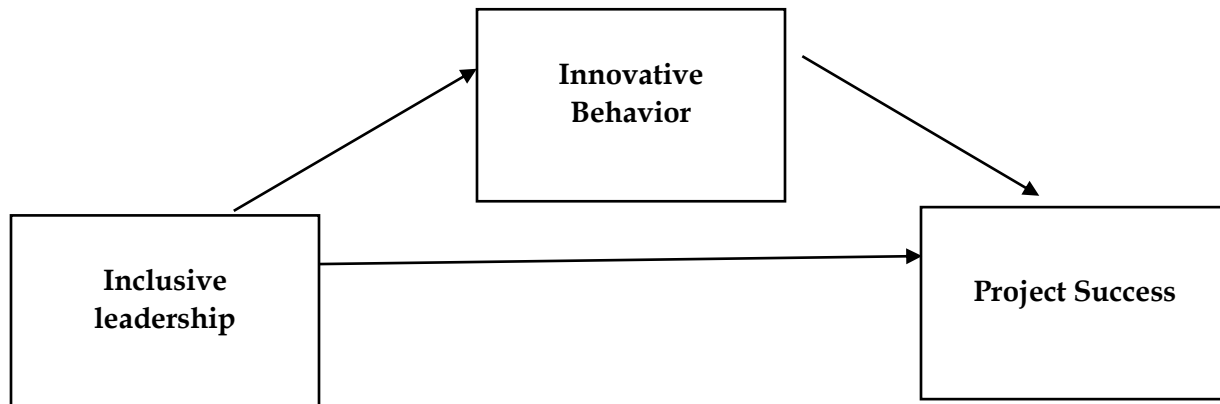## INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT SUCCESS

Innovative work behavior (IWB) is one of the key mediating mechanisms of the relationship between inclusive leadership and project performance. Effective leadership especially of organizations encourages the employees to be innovative and freely contribute to the projects by creating a culture of psychological safety for the employees to practice; whereby they feel free to put forward any ideas, to try out and come up with the best solutions. By advocating for access and interaction, involvement of the employees in decision making and caring for the team members, the inclusive leaders enable the employees to think out of the box hence leading to improvement of project performance.

Research also underlines the moderating function of IWB in leadership-outcome dynamic. Choi et al., (2017) showed that practicing of the largely recommended inclusive leadership increases innovative behaviour because it fosters a positive perception on how valuable the employee is and hence encourages the development of creativity. This behavior is especially critical in dynamic project environments, where new ideas play a make or break role. Additionally, as revealed by Javed et al., (2019), the study discovered that when Javed et al., (2019) examined the effects of psychological empowerment under inclusive leadership, they revealed that enhanced innovation among employees under the leadership boosts project success. The study also pointed out that employees under inclusive leader also feel welcome to take the initiative and search for innovative ways of doing things which are crucial in realizing project goals.

Sürücü, Maslakçı, and Şeşen (2023) pointed out that IWB is one of the ways in which inclusive leadership influences organizational performance. The projects with high levels of implementation innovation receive the benefits of higher integrated problem solving, flexibility and productivity, and higher rates of success. Likewise, Jiang, Ma, Wang, and Jia (2023) provided evidence that inclusive leaders foster voice behavioral and creativity which enhance project work. Consequently, IWB plays the role of a moderator that links inclusive leadership to project

success. To this effect, the present study has found that the promotion of creativity and innovation is indirectly related to the chance of project success in organizations, emphasizing the importance of promoting inclusive leadership approaches in project-based organizations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.6 Research Hypothesis

Based at the above discussions and theoretical findings of the preceding pupils and researches following speculation were extracted from that allows you to be studied through the usage of instruments. The following speculation are suggested:

H1: Inclusive leadership is positively related to Innovative work behavior.

H2: Inclusive leadership is significantly and positively associated with project success.

H3: Innovative behavior mediates the relationship between Inclusive leadership and success of the project

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Quantitative data gathering methodologies have been evaluated and applied to approach big populations. As a result, in this study, a quantitative data collecting method was adopted for data gathering. This method has the advantage of being simple and yielding a large amount of data in a short amount of time.

TYPE OF STUDY

This study is mainly an explanatory one in which the impact of inclusive leadership on project performance is investigated. As a result, Afghanistan project-based non-governmental organizations have been engaged for data collecting in order to achieve reliable data and acceptable outcomes. The sample used for the analysis was supposed to represent the total

466

population. The reason for this is that the influence on the entire population would be simple to extrapolate.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is a standard for evaluating and enhancing market research and facilitating research questions. Research plans allow researchers to recognize the essence of analysis and associate empirical evidence with research questions. There are two common methods of analytical design, one is qualitative and the other is quantitative. Quantitative approaches are often adopted by researchers for reliability and effectiveness reasons. Current research is carried out using various methods and tools of quantitative methodologies. According to Wiersma and Jurs (2005), quantitative research methods translate facts into numbers and examine them further to identify causes and effects, connections and relationships. It is important to note that respondents have expressed their support and dissatisfaction with statements in favor or dissatisfaction by measurable and observable means. In addition, the goal of the quantitative approach is to test the statement and improve the generalizability of the results.

POPULATION, SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND SAMPLING SIZE

The Afghanistan NGO project is the population of this study, but it is very difficult to collect data from all members of the population. All people working these NGOs are the elements of the population. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the size of the sample. Total 300 respondents as a sample size were selected from whom data was collected through research questionnaires.

INSTRUMENTATION

In this analysis, we used a closed-end questionnaire to test four variables. The questionnaire is analyzed on a Likert scale with options from 1 to 5. One strongly disagrees and the other strongly agrees. Nine items from a research by Carmeli, ReiterPalmon, and Ziv (2010) were adapted to measure inclusive leadership. Six items developed by Janssen (2000) were adapted for innovative behavior and project success was measured using 13 items created by Aga, Noorder havenand Vallejo (2016).

STATISTICAL TOOLS

Statistical analysis was conducted using regression analysis and Hayes' PROCESS macro to examine the relationships among inclusive leadership, innovative work behavior, and project success. Regression analysis tested the direct effects, while PROCESS macro assessed the mediating role of innovative work behavior in the proposed model.

RESULTS

A questionnaire was used to collect data for this investigation. In Kabul, the researcher handed out 300 questionnaires to employees of non-governmental organizations. The workforce was assembled using managers and subordinates. A total of 264 questionnaires were returned and revised by respondents. As a result, an exceptional response rate of 88 percent was achieved. The demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	223	84.5%
Female	41	15.5%
Age		
Under 20	55	20.8%
21-30	97	36.7%
31-40	71	26.9%
41-50 & above	41	15.5%
Experience		
Less than 1 year	108	40.9%
2-5 years	107	40.5%
6-10 years	38	14.4%
10 and above	11	4.2%
Education		
Undergraduate	35	13.3%
Graduate	142	53.8%
Master	87	33.0%

RELIABILITY STATISTICS

Table 2: below shows the results of the Cronbach's alpha test. All the variables were tested and found that all variables were excellent to be used for data collection. The values of all three variables were in acceptable threshold of the study. The reliability values for inclusive leadership, innovative behavior, and project success were 0.851, 0.803, and 0.904 respectively.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Variables	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Inclusive Leadership	09	.851
Innovative Behavior	06	.803
Project Success	13	.904

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP (IL) ON INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR

The results of the regression analysis are displayed in the table below. At the 0.05 level of significance, the R-square value of 0.654 implies that inclusive leadership induces a 65.4 percent shift in Innovative behavior. The regression coefficient, or beta value, for IL and IB are 0.1826 and 0.2715 respectively and they are also significant because the level of significance is less than 0.05. It means that one-unit change in IL and IB would bring increase in Project success with 18% and 27%. The coefficient of regression is crucial since the p value is less than the degree of significance. See results in Table 3:

Table 3: Regression Analysis

Model	Coefficient	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	R Square	F
Constant	0.031**	3.2586	0.001	0.012	0.050	0.654	247.317**
IL → PS	0.182**	5.2746	0.000	0.114	0.250		
IB → PS	0.271**	12.2968	0.000	0.228	0.315		

Note: ** indicates significance; IL = Inclusive Leadership; PS = Project Success; IB = Innovative Behavior

MEDIATION ANALYSIS

The results of the mediation study are presented in the table below. The purpose of the research was to investigate the impact of inclusive leadership on project success, as well as the function of innovative behavior as a mediating variable. in table 4.7, the results showed that the direct effect of x on y is significant because the p value is less than 0.05 and some of the effects of inclusive leadership is shown in the analysis on project success that is 0.1826 while in the presence of mediator that is innovative behavior. In the same manner, the indirect effects of inclusive leadership passes on through the innovative behavior on project success as well that is

0.2888, meaning that there is partial mediation available of innovative behavior on the relationship between inclusive leadership and project success.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis

Effect Type	Effect	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
Total Effect (IL → PS)	0.471**	14.774	0.000	0.408	0.534
Direct Effect (IL → PS)	0.182**	5.274	0.000	0.114	0.250
Indirect Effect (via IB)	0.288**	-	-	0.217	0.370

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Based upon the above results, in this research all the hypothesis is accepted and true.

1	**H1: Inclusive leadership is positively related to Innovative work behavior.**	Accepted
2	H2: Inclusive leadership is significantly and positively associated with project success.	Accepted
3	H3: Innovative behavior mediates the relationship between Inclusive leadership and success of the project	Accepted

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The underpinning theory for the suggested model, the leader member exchange theory, depicts the purpose of the current study. The goal of this model was to see how inclusive leadership affected project success, utilizing creative work behavior as a mediator. The concept was specifically researched in NGOs sector initiatives in Kabul, Afghanistan. The head of a firm is its most recognizable figure. A project leader must have the essential abilities and instincts to see the project through to completion. The findings of the investigation backed up the model that had been proposed.

As has been discovered, inclusive leadership has a significant and beneficial impact on project success. The other proposed cooperation, which included mediation, produced significant results as well. When it comes to creative job behavior, what is the relationship between inclusive leadership and project performance? The findings of the study confirmed the hypothesised model, as expected. The goal of this research was to see how inclusive leadership affected project performance, as well as the function of creative work behavior as a mediating element. Let's look at each theory in more detail. The hypothesis is discussed in detail in the following sections.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR

H1: There is a positive association between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior. There is a clear correlation between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior,

according to the research. When a leader is inclusive, he or she may inspire staff to attempt new things and foster creativity. Employees who work for a CEO who is inclusive are encouraged to take risks that benefit the organization. An inclusive leader, according to Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv (2010), values his employees by welcoming their ideas and aiding them in rebuilding and inventing. He outlines the main purpose before allowing them to create something fresh and do things on their own. As a result, the leader's purposeful inclusive demeanor is critical in motivating innovation.

Lee (2008) discovered that workers who were permitted to develop their own ideas and conduct work according to their own expectations did better than those who were assigned exact tasks in complete, rigorous traditional settings. This sense of freedom and authority can only be instilled by the leader. He has the option of allowing the employee to complete the task in his or her own manner. As a result, in a non-traditional work setting, an inclusive leader empowers workers to contribute fresh ideas.

However, simply generating a sense of ingenuity isn't enough. Such settings might also be created in order to encourage employees to grow and provide new ideas. Workers should be offered such work environments, according to De Jong & Den Hartog (2010), in order to sharpen their abilities and test new ideas. Similarly, Nembhard & Edmondson (2006) indicated that inclusive leaders make the bulk of decisions by discussing them with employees, allowing people to feel more open and empowered to carry out their job obligations in their own way. When individuals believe they own their work, they become more receptive to discussing ideas and completing work, which is more effective and appreciable for the project.

We can conclude from the preceding discussion that an inclusive leader may develop a sense of creativity among employees by serving as a mentor and being the type of person that listens to and values their ideas. So, when hiring a project leader, keep in mind that if we're working on a project that requires ultimate uniqueness, innovation, market compatibility, and flexibility in response to changing market conditions, the person should have inclusive skills, because it's been proven that: Inclusive leadership has a significant impact on innovative work behavior, because it allows people to develop a positive and significant sense of newness.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND PROJECT SUCCESS

H2: There is a positive association between Inclusive Leadership and Project Success.

Employees' creative work activities are tremendously valuable to project success since they can immediately improve and raise major job efficiency and project outcomes (Drner, 2012). Employees' creative work behavior is influenced by encouragement, performance enhancement, benefit, and loss (Yuan and Woodman, 2010). In order to accomplish the project and increase their ability to compete with competitors, a corporation needs push employees to be innovative

in order to keep up with the changing environment (Ramoothy, Flood, Slattery, & Sardessai, 2005). In order to increase innovative behavior, a company must have a social atmosphere, because innovative behavior may swiftly offer new ideas and find answers to diverse difficulties (Mclean, 2005). Employees that engage in innovative job activities have a smart mind full of new ideas that can be effective in recognizing challenges and executing solutions to a variety of issues (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007; Huthwaite, 2007).

Creative work behavior is necessary in today's competitive environment, and it is recognized as the most crucial aspect in accomplishing goals and meeting objectives. Projects are a dominant tool for generating economic value, acquiring a competitive edge, and providing business benefits for businesses, which is why every business sets its goals based on this strategy. The quality of the job has a significant impact on the project's success (Good quality, Bad quality). The components that affect creative work are (Opportunity Exploration, Idea Generation, Championing, and Application), while project failure is usually due to inadequate management (Chatchawan et. al. 2017). Management has the power to change the course of a project based on their needs and organizational objectives. Success is influenced by time constraints, budgets, staff, schedules, efficiency, client satisfaction, and skills. Project completion is a difficult and usually illusory concept, but it is critical to a project's success. Nothing is impossible in our world, and if these impossibilities are blocking us from achieving, there is a way to overcome them: hard work and true sentiments about the work.

Organic, inventive, and innovative systems are crucial for performance, according to the findings (Martins & Terblanche, F. 2003). The quality of the job has a significant impact on the project's success (Good quality, Bad quality). Everyone in an innovative world strives to reach their goals. We must follow a set of tight standards (processes) to do this, but as we all know, everything in the world has both positive and negative repercussions. As a result, the findings of these studies are in line with current research.

CONCLUSION

In the context of project-based organizations in NGOs in Kabul, Afghanistan, the goal of this study was to investigate the effect of inclusive leadership on project success, as well as the mediating role of innovative work behavior. According to the interpretation, the findings demonstrate that inclusive leadership is crucial for successfully executing projects and enhances the success in a favorable way, as well as that innovative work behavior has a partial mediating impact on the relationship.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The importance of creativity should be remembered by top management because it is a crucial component in generating great results; also, this study indicates and potentially adds to project

success. If we are to thrive in a rapidly changing and unpredictable digital market where customer behavior moves on a dime, we must focus on innovative goods, which can only be accomplished through inclusive leadership, according to the study's conclusions. This study has added to the existing body of knowledge in a new field. This study would provide empirical support for the theory as well as administratively realistic evidence when dealing with projects during their implementation and various stages.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The focus of this study is on establishing a robust methodological foundation. We don't have rules in social sciences, but there are certain restrictions to social scientific research since factors like human attitude can't be predicted accurately, thus these studies can't be 100 percent accurate, and the analysis has some obvious flaws. The data was submitted by project-based organization employees. Cultural and contextual factors have an impact on the study's findings. Furthermore, data from the NGOs sector was only acquired using a simple random sampling methodology, implying that data may be collected more efficiently using a different sampling process. The sample size was 300, and only data from Kabul, Afghanistan, was acquired. To acquire a clearer image of the sample, a new sampling method and the quantity of respondents may be employed in the future.

Another possibility is that respondents have little or no grasp of the investigative process. There may be slight variances in various situations and sectors other than project-based organizations because the research model was adopted after extensive analysis and testing.

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