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Inclusive Leadership in Digitally Mediated Work: A Boundary-Conditions Model of Belonging, Voice, Visibility, and Opportunity Across Hybrid Organizations

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Abstract

Hybrid work redistributes when, where, and through which channels employees encounter leaders, colleagues, information, and career-relevant opportunities. This redistribution complicates inclusive leadership because practices that foster inclusion in co-present settings may not travel evenly across physical and digital boundaries. This article develops an original non-empirical boundary-conditions model linking inclusive leadership to four analytically distinct domains: belonging, voice, visibility and recognition, and opportunity. The synthesis treats digital mediation neither as inherently inclusive nor as intrinsically exclusionary. Instead, it argues that leadership effects depend on whether hybrid arrangements preserve relational access, make contribution channels usable, render work appropriately visible without demanding costly signaling, and distribute career-relevant attention and opportunities without privileging physical presence. The model further incorporates organizational, technological, gendered, intersectional, household, and leader-capacity conditions that can strengthen, weaken, or redirect these relationships. Inclusive leadership is therefore conceptualized as potentially compensatory when it restores access lost through digital distance, but insufficient when inequality is embedded in work design, collaboration networks, policy enactment, or recognition systems. The article contributes by separating inclusion from representation, leadership intent from enacted experience, visibility from recognition, and flexibility from equal opportunity. Its propositions remain evidence-bounded: the underlying literatures are heterogeneous across sectors, countries, levels of analysis, and research designs, and few studies jointly test inclusive leadership, hybrid mediation, gendered inequality, and the four focal inclusion domains. The model consequently offers a theoretically organized agenda for validation rather than a claim of universal effectiveness.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, Hybrid work, Belonging, Employee voice, Digital visibility, Gendered organizations

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Introduction

Hybrid work has moved inclusion away from an exclusively co-present problem. Employees may formally belong to the same organization while encountering different amounts of spontaneous contact, managerial attention, peer interaction, and digitally observable activity. Qualitative evidence on inclusive organizational behavior indicates that inclusion is experienced differently across work modalities and social identities, making modality part of the inclusion problem rather than merely a scheduling choice [1]. The analytical issue is therefore not whether employees possess nominal access to the same organization, but whether hybrid arrangements distribute the relational and organizational conditions through which inclusion is experienced.

Inclusive leadership provides an important starting point because it has been theorized around enabling belongingness while valuing employees' uniqueness [2]. Yet the literature also remains heterogeneous in definitions, levels of analysis,

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mechanisms, and contexts, leaving substantial scope for boundary-sensitive theorizing [3]. This article addresses that gap by proposing that digitally mediated inclusion should be evaluated across four connected but non-equivalent domains: belonging, voice, visibility and recognition, and opportunity. The argument does not assume that hybrid work weakens all four, nor that inclusive leaders can overcome every structural disadvantage. Instead, it asks when leader behavior compensates for digital distance, when technology and work design reproduce exclusion despite inclusive intent, and when gendered or intersectional conditions reshape who benefits from hybrid flexibility.

Why hybrid work changes the meaning of inclusion

Digitally mediated work changes the sites through which inclusion is enacted. Contemporary inclusive-organizational-behavior scholarship emphasizes that inclusion must be reconsidered as organizational relationships, participation, and work arrangements become more digitally mediated [4]. In hybrid settings, proximity is episodic rather than shared continuously: some interactions occur face to face, others through synchronous platforms, asynchronous messages, enterprise systems, or digital traces. Inclusion therefore becomes partly a problem of access to relational cues, informal knowledge, attention, and interpretable presence across channels.

This shift matters because physical distance is not equivalent to social exclusion. Hybrid arrangements can widen autonomy and participation for some employees while weakening particular relational resources for others. The relevant theoretical question is consequently configurational: which inclusion-relevant resources are preserved, lost, or redistributed when employees differ in location, synchrony, channel use, and network position? The model developed here treats digital mediation as a boundary condition on inclusive leadership rather than a direct predictor of inclusion. Such a formulation preserves the possibility that the same hybrid arrangement may support one domain—for example, autonomy or participation—while simultaneously weakening another, such as informal visibility or access to unplanned interaction.

Inclusive leadership in digitally mediated organizations

Inclusive leadership should be treated as enacted relational practice rather than as a leader characteristic that automatically produces inclusion. Theory on work-group inclusion emphasizes that leaders can sustain or discourage inclusion through everyday behaviors that affect whether members are accepted, valued, and able to contribute [5]. In digitally mediated work, these behaviors may include who receives invitations to contribute, whose messages receive response, how meeting participation is structured, whether remote employees are included in informal exchanges, and how managers interpret digitally visible work. The particular forms are context dependent; the more important distinction is between inclusive intent and inclusion-producing enactment.

That distinction is reinforced by work on policy-practice decoupling, which shows why what leaders say and what organizational policies promise need not match the climate employees experience [6]. Hybrid work can create additional sites for such decoupling because formal flexibility may coexist with uneven meeting access, response latency, information flows, or recognition. The proposed model therefore separates leader intention, leader behavior, local inclusion climate, and employee experience. This separation also prevents technology use from being mistaken for leadership effectiveness: a manager may communicate frequently through digital channels yet reproduce exclusion if access, responsiveness, or recognition remains uneven.

Belonging across physical and virtual boundaries

Belonging is the first domain because hybrid work reorganizes the relational experiences through which employees feel part of a collective. Longitudinal qualitative evidence from hybrid expert work shows that remote and onsite work provide different resources and challenges for belonging rather than forming a simple high-versus-low continuum [7]. The implication is not that office presence is inherently superior, but that belonging depends on how physical synchrony, virtual connection, autonomy, and interpersonal contact are combined over time.

Leadership may compensate for some of these losses when it strengthens shared identity and connection. Research on identity leadership in remote work provides evidence that leadership processes oriented toward a sense of “us” are relevant to team connectedness under distance [8]. This does not make identity leadership interchangeable with inclusive leadership; it identifies a plausible adjacent mechanism through which leaders can reduce relational fragmentation.

Digital interaction can also restore access when its use builds relational confidence. In hybrid knowledge-seeking relationships, specific visible uses of enterprise social media helped employees form confidence about how colleagues would respond, supporting subsequent knowledge exchange [9]. This suggests that digital tools matter through relational use rather than mere availability. The proposed model accordingly treats belonging as conditional on whether digitally mediated interaction sustains meaningful relational access, not simply whether employees log into common platforms.

Voice and unequal access to managerial attention

Voice is analytically distinct from belonging because employees can feel socially connected yet remain reluctant or unable to influence decisions. Contemporary voice scholarship characterizes speaking up as discretionary and context sensitive; silence cannot be read simply as absence of ideas, commitment, or concern [10]. In hybrid organizations, the opportunity to speak may also depend on who is present when issues arise, who receives meeting airtime, whose messages are noticed, and whether asynchronous contributions enter the same decision process as co-present discussion.

Leader behavior can shape these conditions. Observational evidence from multiprofessional teams shows that inclusive leader language can promote voice, while the relationship varies with professional group membership [11]. This is important for the present model because it demonstrates that invitations to contribute need not operate identically across social positions. Leadership can open a channel without equalizing the confidence, legitimacy, or attention attached to contributions.

Participation research further raises the question of whose interests actually matter within organizational processes [12]. The proposed extension to hybrid work is that digital access to a meeting, platform, or feedback channel should not be treated as equivalent to influential voice. Inclusive leadership can compensate for unequal access when it actively distributes invitations, response, and consideration; it is less likely to do so where decision routines systematically privilege those with greater proximity, status, or network access.

Visibility, recognition, and digital presence

Visibility becomes especially consequential when co-presence is intermittent. Distributed workers may engage in costly signaling practices to demonstrate availability or commitment, showing that "being seen" can require active production rather than follow naturally from performance [13]. Digitization also increases behavioral visibility by making activities observable through communication records, platform interactions, and other traces [14]. Yet observability and recognition are different constructs: employees can become more traceable without their contributions being interpreted as valuable, promotable, or deserving of managerial attention.

Hybrid relationships can also deteriorate when coworkers do not experience communication technologies similarly. Two-wave network evidence shows that misalignment in ease-of-use perceptions can reduce maintenance of advice-seeking relationships, particularly as remote-work intensity rises [15]. Remote informal communication likewise depends on interacting socio-contextual, intrapersonal, and technological factors rather than on platform access alone [16]. Together, these findings suggest that digital presence can increase some forms of visibility while weakening the relational pathways through which work becomes noticed and understood.

Table 1 organizes the resulting exposure logic across the four inclusion domains, distinguishing where leadership may compensate and where residual structural inequality can remain.

Table 1. Digital mediation redistributes access differently across belonging, voice, visibility, and opportunity

Inclusion domain	Digital mediation feature	Mechanism of unequal access	Workers most exposed where supported	Leadership compensation	Organizational design support	Residual inequality risk
Belonging	Episodic physical contact; mediated relational cues	Reduced informal connection or relational confidence	Workers with weaker prior ties or limited synchronous contact	Deliberate connection, identity-building, responsive interaction	Protected relational time; accessible mixed-mode interaction	Connection may remain uneven across networks and identities
Voice	Synchronous and asynchronous contribution channels	Unequal invitations, airtime, response, or consideration	Lower-status or less proximate contributors	Structured solicitation, acknowledgment, follow-through	Equalized meeting protocols; asynchronous input routes	Formal access may not translate into influence
Visibility and recognition	Digital traces, messaging activity, intermittent face time	Observable activity may be misread, ignored, or require costly signaling	Remote-intensive workers and those outside informal attention networks	Explicit recognition criteria; attention to contribution rather than presence	Transparent work attribution; reduced reliance on face-time cues	More visibility can coexist with unequal recognition
Opportunity	Career-relevant interaction distributed across physical and digital settings	Access to information, sponsorship, developmental work, or decision makers can diverge	Workers with weaker network access or structurally constrained flexibility	Active sponsorship and deliberate distribution of developmental access	Auditable allocation routines; location-neutral eligibility rules	Leadership cannot fully offset unequal work design, networks, or policy enactment

Note: The table is an evidence-bounded synthesis of mechanisms developed in the preceding sections. Leadership-compensation and design-support entries are proposed organizational responses, not validated universal interventions.

Opportunity allocation in hybrid work

Opportunity is the most consequential domain because belonging, voice, and visibility may still fail to translate into career-relevant access. Inclusive leadership itself is not costless: multi-wave dyadic research shows that highly inclusive leader behavior can increase leaders' role overload and stress, with resilience buffering that relationship [17]. Leader capacity therefore belongs inside the boundary model. A theory that assumes unlimited attention, sponsorship, and responsiveness risks treating inclusion as a motivational choice when it may also depend on workload and organizational support.

Hybrid work is also not inherently detrimental. A six-month randomized field experiment found that a defined two-days-per-week work-from-home schedule improved retention without damaging measured performance in the studied technology company [18]. This result is important precisely because it limits deficit assumptions; however, it does not establish equal access to promotion, sponsorship, or developmental assignments.

At the structural level, large-scale evidence from Microsoft shows that remote work altered collaboration networks, making them more siloed and changing communication patterns [19]. Such network changes can plausibly affect access to information and relationships, although opportunity outcomes were not directly established. Recent organizational research likewise indicates that digitalization interacts with inclusive climate and employee resources rather than producing uniform outcomes [20]. The proposed model therefore treats opportunity allocation as downstream of both leadership attention and organizational architecture.

Gendered and intersectional consequences of digital mediation

Hybrid flexibility enters organizations already structured by gendered expectations, occupations, work designs, and care arrangements. Comparative qualitative research in financial-services IT shows that work design can shape the acceptability and uptake of remote work in gendered ways, challenging the assumption that nominally flexible or less bureaucratic systems necessarily distribute flexibility equally [21]. Related evidence shows that remote work can enable workers to sustain dual devotion to work and family while also reproducing gendered pathways into overwork [22]. Flexibility is therefore not a single emancipatory resource.

Recent research in *Gender, Work & Organization* similarly describes telework as simultaneously helpful and harmful in parenting contexts, depending on how individualization and gendered responsibilities are organized [23]. Household negotiations form another boundary: interview evidence indicates that perceptions of whose job is genuinely flexible can amplify unequal divisions of unpaid labor [24]. These processes provide alternative explanations for apparent work-location effects because an employee's digital availability may reflect care arrangements as much as organizational preference.

The organizational layer also matters. A holistic review of workplace gender inequities shows that disadvantage is reproduced through multiple processes and practices rather than through one isolated decision [25]. Intersectionality further requires caution against treating women as a homogeneous category; workplace experiences of gender are jointly shaped by race and other social positions [26]. In hybrid organizations, this means that averaged gender comparisons can conceal unequal exposure to managerial attention, technological access, credibility, and career opportunity.

Formal equality policies offer no guarantee of equivalent enactment. Ethnographic research shows that managers can implement gender-equality-related flexibility policies differently because managerial roles are themselves embedded in gendered organizational dynamics [27]. Survey evidence likewise indicates that flexible-working arrangements have different associations with housework and childcare across arrangement and occupational lines [28]. Finally, an integrative review of virtuality and women's career equality concludes that virtual work is double-edged, capable of relieving some constraints while reproducing or creating others [29]. Taken together, these studies support a boundary-sensitive position: digital mediation does not carry a stable gender effect. Its consequences depend on work design, household structure, managerial enactment, network position, occupational context, and intersecting social identities. The model developed in the next section therefore treats gendered and intersectional inequality not as an auxiliary moderator but as part of the conditions determining whose access to belonging, voice, visibility, and opportunity can actually be equalized.

A boundary-conditions model of inclusive leadership

The proposed model treats inclusive leadership as effective only insofar as enacted practices preserve or repair access across four inclusion domains. Established theory links inclusive leadership to belonging, uniqueness, and enacted work-group inclusion while distinguishing formal intent from experienced climate [2, 5, 6]. The model extends those premises by proposing that hybrid arrangements create an access layer between leader behavior and employee experience. Leadership can therefore be inclusive in intention yet uneven in consequence when physical and digital pathways distribute connection, attention, observability, recognition, or career access differently.

The model is deliberately multilevel. At individual and dyadic levels, relational confidence, voice invitations, and technology use shape access. At team and network levels, informal communication and collaboration structures affect who remains connected. At organizational and household levels, work design, policy enactment, caregiving demands, and gendered or

intersectional positioning can constrain whether apparent flexibility becomes usable inclusion. Leader capacity is also finite, so compensation cannot be assumed to expand without cost. This architecture prevents three common conflations: digital access with relational access, observed activity with favorable recognition, and formal flexibility with usable career opportunity. Each transition is therefore treated as empirically contestable rather than assumed.

Figure 1 depicts this proposed architecture as conditional access rather than a direct leadership-to-outcome pathway.

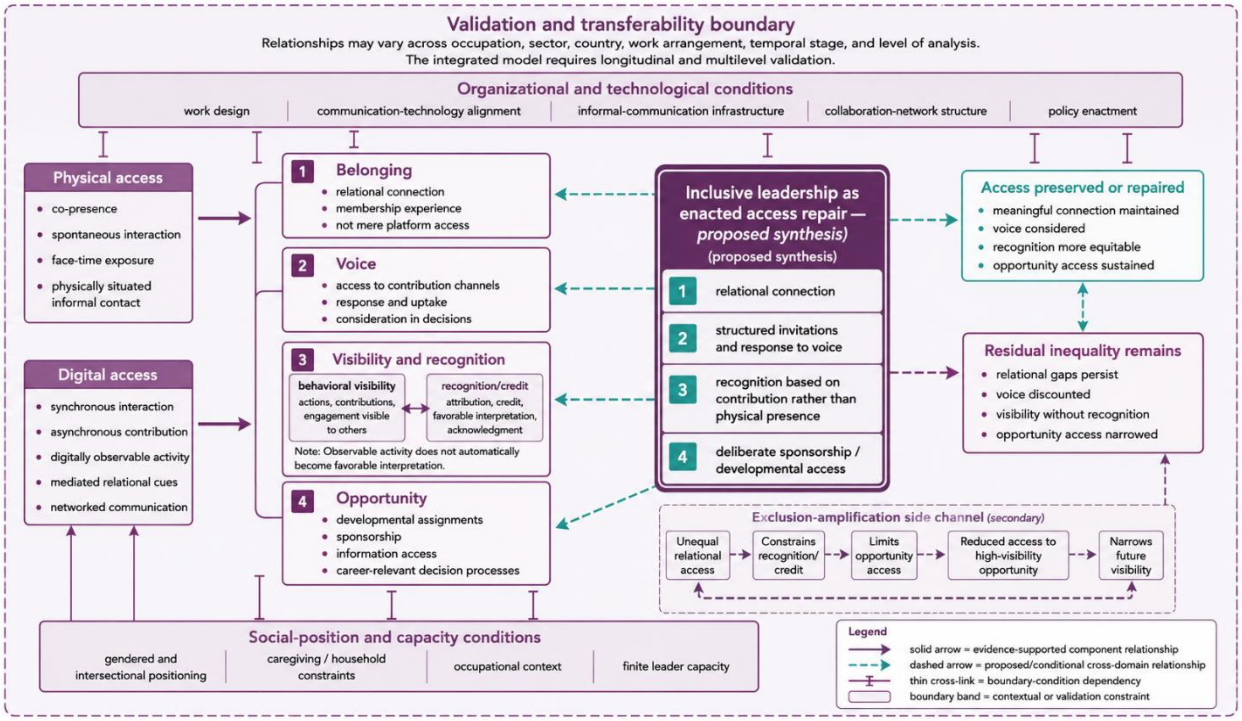

Figure 1. Inclusive leadership offsets digital-distance inequalities only when access to belonging, voice, visibility, and opportunity remains recoverable

When inclusive leadership compensates for digital distance

Compensation is most plausible when digital distance removes relational or interactional resources that leaders can deliberately restore. Identity-oriented leadership can support remote connection [8], while technology use that builds relational confidence can facilitate knowledge exchange across distance [9]. Inclusive invitations can also increase voice under some identity conditions [11], and meaningful participation requires more than nominal access to a channel [12]. Taken together, these findings support candidate compensatory mechanisms but do not establish a single validated compensation process.

The proposed model therefore distinguishes recoverable access deficits from structural constraints. Leaders may reconnect isolated employees, solicit asynchronous input, acknowledge contributions that are less physically visible, or deliberately widen sponsorship access. These practices should matter most where exclusion arises from missed interaction, weak relational cues, or uneven attention. Their reach should be weaker when disadvantage is embedded in network structure, job design, managerial discretion, or unequal care burdens. Inclusive leadership is thus conceptualized as an access-repair capability whose effects depend on what produced the access deficit and whether leaders possess the authority, information, and capacity to alter it.

When technology reproduces or intensifies exclusion

Digital systems can simultaneously increase behavioral observability, destabilize particular relationships, and restructure collaboration networks [14, 15, 19]. These effects need not form one causal sequence, but together they show why more digital traceability cannot be equated with more inclusion. A worker may leave abundant digital traces yet remain peripheral to informal exchanges, receive less interpretive attention, or be absent when career-relevant judgments are formed.

Exclusion is intensified when visibility becomes decoupled from recognition and recognition becomes decoupled from opportunity. The article proposes that such decoupling can generate a reinforcing inequality pathway: limited relational access reduces opportunities for contextualized recognition; weaker recognition can reduce access to developmental work; and fewer high-visibility assignments can further narrow future visibility. Inclusive leadership may interrupt parts of this loop through deliberate attention or sponsorship, but it cannot be presumed to override structural network or policy conditions.

Figure 2 specifies this failure pathway and the points at which compensatory leadership may cease to be sufficient

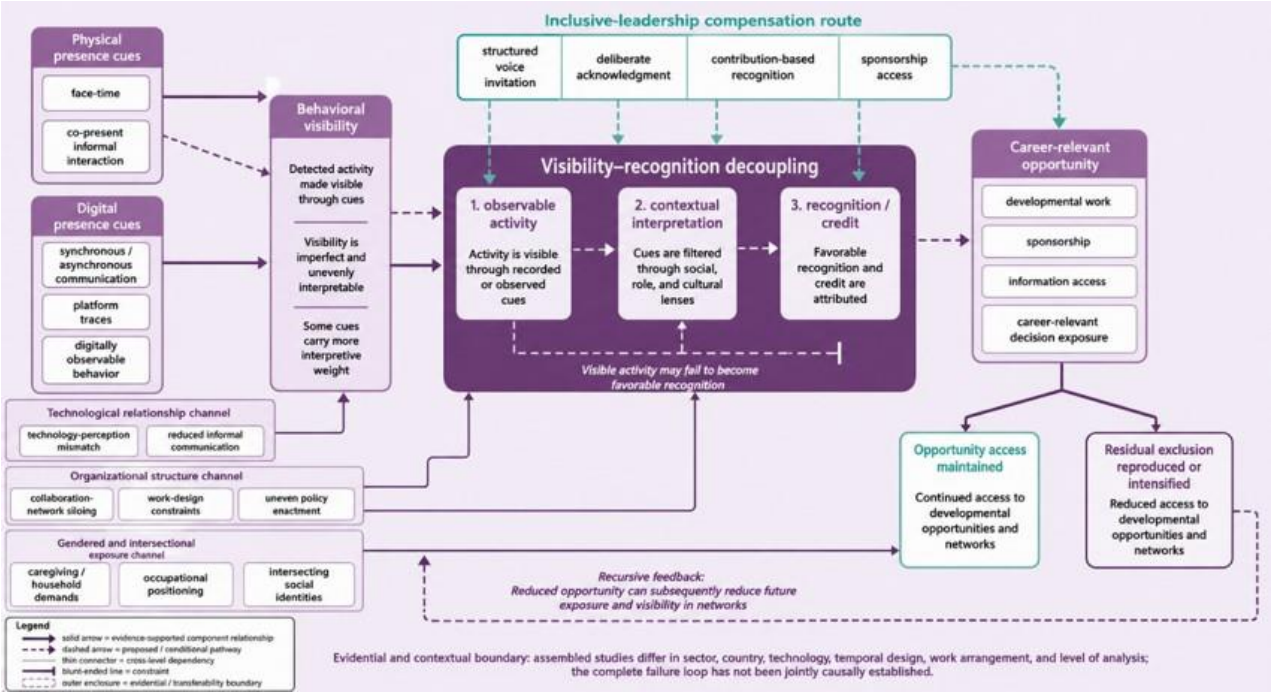

Figure 2. Digital mediation amplifies exclusion when visibility and recognition decouple before opportunity is allocated

Organizational and technological boundary conditions

Three classes of condition limit whether leadership can equalize hybrid access. First, technological conditions shape the usability of communication and maintenance of informal or advice relationships. Technology-perception misalignment becomes more consequential as remote intensity rises [15], while informal remote communication depends on interacting social and technical conditions [16]. Second, organizational structure matters: collaboration networks can become more siloed under distance [19], and leaders' ability to compensate is constrained when inclusive enactment creates role overload [17]. Third, gendered organizational arrangements alter who can convert flexibility into inclusion. Work design can structure remote-work uptake, managerial enactment can diverge from equality-policy intent, and virtuality can produce opposing career-equality pathways [21, 27, 29]. These conditions are not proposed as universal moderators with fixed effect sizes. They identify where the direction or strength of inclusive-leadership effects should be empirically tested.

Table 2 translates these boundaries into observable organizational signals without treating them as validated thresholds.

Table 2. Conditions that alter whether inclusive leadership can equalize access in hybrid work

Boundary condition	Pathway moderated	Expected pattern	Mechanism	Most exposed workers/contexts	Observable organizational signal	Design implication
Technology-perception alignment	Voice and relational access	Weaker compensation when alignment is low	Communication friction and tie loss	Remote-intensive dyads	Repeated channel avoidance or advice-tie decay	Support compatible, accessible communication practices
Informal-communication infrastructure	Belonging and visibility	Weaker when informal contact is scarce	Loss of contextual and relational cues	Employees outside dense networks	Location-linked gaps in informal exchange	Protect mixed-mode informal access
Collaboration-network structure	Visibility and opportunity	Weaker when networks silo	Reduced cross-boundary information access	Peripheral or remote-heavy workers	Persistent location-based network separation	Examine network access, not presence alone
Leader capacity	All four domains	Weaker under overload	Finite attention and responsiveness	High-span or high-demand leadership roles	Delayed response and uneven follow-through	Resource inclusive enactment
Work design and policy enactment	Opportunity	Direction may differ across units	Unequal usability of flexibility	Workers with constrained discretion	Flexibility uptake diverges by role or group	Audit enactment as well as policy

Caregiving and intersectional position	Belonging, visibility, opportunity	Effects may reverse across groups	Unequal time, legitimacy, and exposure	Workers facing layered constraints	Systematic group differences in access patterns	Test heterogeneous rather than average effects

Note: Expected patterns are proposed boundary-condition hypotheses derived from the manuscript synthesis, not validated universal moderator effects.

Contributions to inclusive leadership and gendered-organization theory

The first contribution is to relocate digital mediation from context to mechanism-bearing boundary. Inclusive-leadership theory explains why belonging, uniqueness, and enacted leader behavior matter, but hybrid work makes access to those behaviors uneven. The proposed model therefore inserts a digitally mediated access layer between leadership enactment and experienced inclusion. It predicts neither uniformly weaker nor stronger leadership effects; it asks which resources remain reachable.

The second contribution is to gendered-organization theory. Hybrid flexibility is often discussed as an arrangement employees possess, whereas the evidence reviewed here shows that work design, household demands, managerial enactment, and career structures condition its use and consequences. The model separates physical presence, behavioral visibility, recognition, and opportunity so that apparent flexibility cannot stand in for equality.

The third contribution is relational: belonging, voice, visibility, and opportunity are treated as distinct yet potentially cumulative. An employee may belong without influencing decisions, speak without being recognized, or be visible without receiving opportunity. That differentiation creates testable points at which inclusion can fail rather than assuming one global inclusion state. This reframing also changes the unit of theoretical concern. Inclusion is not located solely in leader behavior or employee perception; it can fail at interfaces connecting people, technologies, networks, organizational routines, and social positions.

Implications for hybrid-work design

The framework shifts hybrid-work design away from counting office days alone. Organizations can instead examine whether location changes access to relationship-building, participation, interpretable visibility, and career-relevant opportunities. Hybrid belonging research suggests that remote and onsite work provide different relational resources [7], while network evidence cautions that distance can alter collaboration structures [19]. Design should therefore assess access patterns rather than assume that either co-presence or flexibility is intrinsically inclusive.

For leaders, the practical implication is disciplined attention rather than permanent availability. Structured invitations, explicit recognition criteria, and deliberate sponsorship may reduce some access asymmetries, but they are not substitutes for redesigning inequitable networks, jobs, or policies. Such practices should be treated as candidates for evaluation, not proven interventions.

Future research agenda

Future research should test the model as a sequence of separable propositions rather than as one omnibus scale. Longitudinal and within-person designs can examine whether changes in hybrid exposure precede changes in belonging, voice, visibility, recognition, and opportunity. Multilevel studies should distinguish employees, leader-member dyads, teams, networks, and organizations, while measuring leader inclusiveness separately from experienced inclusion.

Network and behavioral data are especially important because self-reported access may not match advice ties, speaking behavior, digital visibility, or actual allocation decisions. Field experiments or credible quasi-experiments could test specific design changes without assuming that one hybrid schedule generalizes across tasks or sectors. Research should also examine leader capacity as a constraint rather than treating inclusive behavior as costless.

Finally, intersectional tests require adequately powered samples and outcomes such as sponsorship, stretch assignments, development conversations, pay progression, and promotion. Comparative studies should also test whether the same boundary operates similarly across occupations, countries, organizational hierarchies, and different stages of hybrid-work institutionalization. The model should be rejected or revised where predicted boundary conditions fail to differentiate these outcomes.

Limitations

This synthesis integrates literatures that differ substantially in constructs, sectors, countries, technologies, and levels of analysis. Direct evidence jointly examining inclusive leadership, hybrid mediation, gendered or intersectional inequality, and all four focal domains remains limited. Several mechanisms are therefore connected theoretically rather than demonstrated within the same empirical design.

Transferability is also constrained. Much digitally mediated work research concerns knowledge workers, professional occupations, technology-intensive organizations, or pandemic-related transitions. Frontline, precarious, low-autonomy, and weakly digitized work may produce different access structures. Remote-work findings cannot automatically be treated as

hybrid-work effects, and evidence about performance, retention, communication, or household labor cannot be converted into evidence of equal opportunity.

Accordingly, the model is a bounded conceptual architecture. It does not specify universal thresholds, estimate moderator magnitudes, establish a causal chain, or demonstrate that any proposed leadership or work-design response is implementation-ready.

Conclusion

Inclusive leadership in hybrid organizations cannot be understood solely as a stable set of leader behaviors applied through new communication channels. Digital mediation redistributes the relational, attentional, visibility, and opportunity structures through which those behaviors acquire meaning. The proposed boundary-conditions model therefore distinguishes belonging, voice, visibility and recognition, and opportunity while locating their accessibility within organizational, technological, gendered, intersectional, household, network, and leader-capacity conditions.

Its central implication is conditional: inclusive leadership may compensate when digital distance removes resources that leaders can realistically restore, but its reach narrows when exclusion is embedded in work design, policy enactment, collaboration structures, or unequal social constraints. This distinction prevents flexibility from being equated with inclusion and digital presence from being equated with recognition. The framework offers propositions for testing rather than validated prescriptions, and its usefulness ultimately depends on comparative, longitudinal, multilevel, and intersectionally sensitive empirical scrutiny.

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