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Why Belonging Fails Without Voice, Influence, and Organizational Power

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Abstract

Belonging has become a central objective of contemporary inclusion efforts, yet membership, acceptance, and interpersonal recognition do not necessarily provide employees with consequential influence over organizational decisions. This Original Conceptual Framework Article develops a proposed Belonging–Power Framework to distinguish four analytically separate conditions: belonging and legitimate membership, voice access, influence conversion, and organizational power or resource authority. The framework integrates evidence on inclusion, employee voice, hierarchy, endorsement, implementation, structural inequality, and policy–practice decoupling while preserving distinctions between individual experience and organizational structure. It proposes that inclusion can become substantively incomplete when employees are welcomed or heard but remain unable to affect recurring decisions, resource allocations, or rules that shape their work. Three conversion problems are emphasized: belonging without usable voice, voice without consequential uptake, and episodic influence without durable authority. Structural barriers and dependency on gatekeepers are treated as cross-cutting conditions rather than assumed universal mechanisms. The article further proposes diagnostic dimensions for separating sentiment, access, response, implementation, and authority, while rejecting unvalidated thresholds or readiness scores. The framework is intended to organize testable propositions and comparative research, not to establish a causal sequence or prescribe equal authority across all decisions. Its contribution is a bounded conceptual architecture for examining when inclusion reflects meaningful participation and when apparently inclusive membership remains dependent, symbolic, or structurally constrained.

Keywords: Why belonging fails without voice, Organizational power, Conceptual foundations, Voice without decision influence, Belonging–power framework, Diagnostic dimensions

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Introduction

Organizational inclusion is often evaluated through experiences of acceptance, respect, authenticity, or membership. These experiences matter, but they do not by themselves establish that an employee can influence consequential organizational choices. Inclusive-leadership theory defines inclusion through belongingness and being valued for uniqueness, locating important psychological and relational mechanisms through which members may feel accepted while retaining distinctive identities [1]. Work-group inclusion research similarly operationalizes inclusion through belongingness and uniqueness, reinforcing the value of these dimensions while leaving decision authority outside the construct itself [2]. The conceptual problem addressed here begins at that boundary: belonging can be genuine without being equivalent to power.

Inclusion is also context sensitive. Qualitative evidence shows that employees interpret inclusive organizational behavior differently across social identities and work modalities, indicating that inclusion is experienced through situated relationships



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rather than as a uniform condition [3]. Broader diversity scholarship likewise treats inclusion as one part of a larger organizational field concerned with structures, processes, and outcomes rather than as a sufficient descriptor of equality or influence [4]. The present article therefore does not argue that belonging is unimportant. It argues that belonging answers a different question from whether employees can shape decisions, obtain accountable responses to voice, or exercise durable authority over resources and recurring organizational arrangements.

Leadership can help sustain inclusion, yet inclusive leadership should not be treated as evidence that organizational power has been redistributed. Conceptual work distinguishes inclusive, exclusive, assimilation-oriented, and differentiation-oriented leader patterns and identifies psychological safety, empowerment, and identification as possible mechanisms through which leaders affect inclusion [5]. Such mechanisms can create conditions in which members participate more fully, but they do not automatically determine who controls agendas, which proposals are implemented, or whose preferences govern resource allocation.

This Original Conceptual Framework Article therefore proposes a distinction among belonging, voice access, influence conversion, and organizational power. Its central claim is not that these conditions form a validated progression, but that treating them as interchangeable can conceal where inclusion becomes consequentially limited. The contribution is the proposed Belonging–Power Framework: a bounded architecture for identifying conversion gaps between membership, expression, organizational response, implementation, and durable authority. It also distinguishes formal inclusion policy from enacted practice, interpersonal safety from decision rights, visibility from influence, and episodic voice success from recurring power. These distinctions organize the subsequent analysis without implying that every employee should control every decision or that an unimplemented suggestion necessarily indicates exclusion.

Conceptual foundations

A useful starting point is to separate membership from position. Organizational power is relational and often tied to asymmetries in hierarchy, dependence, role expectations, or resource control. Theory on middle power shows that actors occupying positions between higher- and lower-power others can face distinctive role conflicts and behavioral constraints, illustrating that power location is analytically different from whether a person feels accepted by a group [6]. In the proposed framework, belonging therefore concerns legitimate membership, whereas organizational power concerns the capacity to shape consequential and recurring organizational choices.

Hierarchy can also alter whether dissent occurs. Archival and experimental evidence indicates that higher hierarchical rank can suppress principled dissent in unethical-practice contexts through increased identification with the organization and altered ethical perception [7]. This finding does not establish that rank always reduces voice, but it demonstrates why voice cannot be interpreted without attention to positional relationships. An employee's opportunity to speak may exist formally while the psychological and structural conditions surrounding that opportunity remain unequal.

Voice also has social consequences that are not equivalent to organizational authority. Promotive voice can affect status and subsequent leader emergence differently depending on gender and voice type [8]. Status therefore represents recognition or standing that may facilitate influence, but it should not be assumed to confer decision rights or resource control. The same employee may be respected, listened to, and still remain dependent on others for implementation. Nor should differential status returns be interpreted as evidence that voice itself is defective; they can instead indicate that organizational audiences respond differently to who speaks and how challenges or improvements are expressed.

Finally, inclusion processes operate across levels. A multilevel framework of inclusive leadership distinguishes individual, work-group, and organizational processes, cautioning against treating employee perceptions as direct measures of organization-level inclusion [9]. This distinction is central to the proposed article. Belonging is primarily experienced by persons, voice occurs through interactions and channels, influence is visible in responses and decisions, and organizational power is embedded partly in roles, routines, structures, and resource arrangements. The proposed framework links these levels conceptually but does not collapse them. Its relationships remain hypotheses requiring multilevel and longitudinal testing rather than assumptions about a universal sequence.

Voice without decision influence

Employee voice is commonly treated as constructive expression intended to improve organizational functioning, but the presence of voice does not establish that a decision was influenced. Contemporary voice scholarship distinguishes speaking up from silence while emphasizing that motives, targets, content, and context complicate a simple speak-or-remain-silent binary [10]. This matters for inclusion because an organization can provide channels for expression while still filtering which concerns receive attention, endorsement, or action.

Voice forms also differ. Meta-analytic evidence distinguishes promotive and prohibitive voice and shows that their correlates and consequences are not identical [11]. A diagnostic approach should therefore avoid treating all expression as equally risky,

equally useful, or equally likely to affect organizational choices. Whether a suggestion challenges existing practice, highlights a risk, or proposes an improvement can alter both how it is received and what outcomes follow.

Managerial endorsement is one important gate. Across multiple studies, managerial responses varied with characteristics of the voiced message and with regulatory fit, including how mixed or differently framed voice affected processing and endorsement [12]. Rejection, however, cannot automatically be interpreted as exclusion. Idea quality, feasibility, timing, resource constraints, strategic conflict, and legitimate managerial judgment remain rival explanations. The relevant question is whether evaluative access is patterned, accountable, and open rather than whether every proposal succeeds.

Implementation represents a further stage. Conceptual work on managerial voice implementation distinguishes the endorsement of an idea from efforts to enact it and proposes motivation, obligation, perceived control, and network conditions as possible implementation factors [13]. Thus, an employee may speak, be taken seriously, and even obtain approval without seeing the idea converted into action. The available evidence therefore supports decomposing employee voice into expression, managerial endorsement, and implementation rather than treating speaking up as equivalent to organizational action [10, 12, 13].

Table 1 differentiates the forms of participation that may appear inclusive while varying substantially in their capacity to generate consequential organizational influence.

Table 1. Distinguishing Belonging, Voice, Influence, and Organizational Power

Dimension	Core question	What is observable	What it demonstrates	What it does not demonstrate	Main failure condition	Analytical level
Belonging	Do employees experience legitimate membership?	Acceptance, recognition, relational inclusion, ability to remain socially present	Perceived or enacted membership	Decision influence, implementation authority, resource control	Membership without consequential participation	Individual and relational
Valued uniqueness	Can members contribute without suppressing meaningful difference?	Recognition of distinctive perspectives, identities, or expertise	Space for differentiated participation	Equal status, decision rights, or protection from gatekeeping	Inclusion conditional on conformity	Individual and group
Voice access	Can employees raise ideas, concerns, or dissent?	Opportunities to speak, question, challenge, suggest, or escalate	Availability of expression channels	Serious consideration or organizational response	Permission to speak without usable access	Individual, dyadic, and team
Responsive consideration	Does expressed voice enter an accountable decision process?	Acknowledgment, evaluation, explanation, deliberation	Organizational attention to employee input	Acceptance, implementation, or authority	Voice received but procedurally contained	Dyadic and organizational
Influence conversion	Does voice alter a consequential organizational process?	Endorsement, revision of options, implementation, altered decisions	Observable consequence of participation	Durable or recurring power	Episodic influence without continuing authority	Decision episode
Organizational power	Who can shape recurring decisions and resource distributions?	Agenda access, delegated authority, budget discretion, rule-setting capacity	Durable capacity to affect organizational processes	Belonging, psychological safety, or universal legitimacy	Membership dependent on others' discretionary power	Role, team, and organization
Dependency (proposed)	Is participation sustainable without sponsorship or permission?	Reliance on gatekeepers, patrons, exceptions, or informal approval	Contingency of access or influence	Proof of exploitation or exclusion	Influence disappears when sponsorship changes	Relational and structural
Conversion gap (proposed)	Where does participation stop becoming consequential?	Divergence between adjacent dimensions	A diagnostic discrepancy requiring explanation	Proof of discrimination or structural injustice	High apparent inclusion but low consequential participation	Multilevel

Table note. Constructs labelled proposed are original conceptual elements of the Belonging–Power Framework. The table does not assume that every employee should possess equivalent authority or that every unimplemented suggestion represents exclusion.

The table establishes a construct boundary essential to the proposed framework. Inclusion may be substantively valuable even when it does not confer recurring authority, just as the presence of a voice channel cannot establish that expressed concerns meaningfully enter organizational decision processes. Separating these conditions permits researchers to investigate where participation becomes consequential without treating every difference in authority as evidence of exclusion.

Structural barriers to inclusion

A belonging-centered account can understate how organizational structures distribute access to opportunity, resources, and decision arenas. An integrative review of organizational inequality identifies recurring practices in hiring, allocation, promotion, compensation, and structuring through which inequality may be reproduced [14]. These mechanisms shift analysis from whether employees feel welcomed to how organizational routines allocate opportunities and consequences. In the proposed framework, structural barriers are therefore not inferred from dissatisfaction; they refer to patterned organizational arrangements capable of constraining movement from membership or voice toward consequential influence.

A structural perspective also requires attention to agency and resources. Racialized-organization theory argues that organizations can distribute agency and material or symbolic resources unequally and that formal organizational rules may be decoupled from their practical enactment [15]. The relevance here is conceptual rather than universal: such theory demonstrates why apparently neutral membership rules cannot be assumed to reveal how influence actually operates. Race is one important structural dimension, but class, gender, occupation, hierarchy, institutional context, and other forms of differentiation may also require independent study rather than being inferred from this theory.

Policy–practice decoupling is particularly important for inclusion. A multilevel framework distinguishes what leaders or organizations say from what is enacted in everyday inclusion practices and climates [16]. Formal policy can therefore provide legitimate commitments without establishing that employees have equivalent access to decision makers, responsive evaluation, implementation pathways, or organizational resources. Conversely, imperfect implementation does not prove deliberate symbolic action; capability constraints, competing priorities, local leadership variation, and temporal lags are plausible alternatives.

The proposed Belonging–Power Framework treats structural barriers as possible constraints across several conversion points. They may affect who obtains credible membership, who gains access to voice channels, whose contributions are endorsed, which ideas are implemented, and who receives recurring decision rights. This cross-cutting placement is an original synthesis, not an empirically validated mediation model. Structural diagnosis must therefore rely on evidence about organizational practices, authority arrangements, and resource flows rather than sentiment alone. Neither a low belonging score nor an inclusive policy statement is sufficient to determine whether organizational power is distributed equitably.

Symbolic membership and organizational dependency

Formal membership can become misleading when the visible signs of inclusion are interpreted as evidence of substantive influence. Diversity initiatives may generate unintended consequences, including forms of false progress in which the existence of an initiative changes perceptions or behavior without ensuring the intended organizational change [17]. This does not make diversity initiatives inherently symbolic. It establishes a narrower warning: organizational signals of commitment and actual distributions of opportunity or influence should be evaluated separately.

Membership may also remain conditional on identity expectations. Critical theorization of the model-minority stereotype shows how apparently positive categorization can constrain workplace inclusion by attaching membership and advancement to racialized expectations [18]. Such evidence supports examining the terms under which employees are recognized as legitimate members. It does not establish that every minority employee experiences conditional inclusion or that all identity expectations operate through the same mechanism.

Qualitative evidence provides a more direct illustration of partial membership. Research with LGB officers in the Swedish Police describes peripheral inclusion in which formal inclusion coexisted with informal processes of voice and silencing [19]. The organizational and national context limits generalization, but the case demonstrates why formal membership and substantive participation should not be assumed to coincide. Critical, theoretical, and qualitative scholarship indicates that apparently inclusive membership can coexist with false progress, identity-constraining expectations, or peripheral inclusion [17-19].

Building on these distinctions, this article proposes symbolic membership as a condition in which visible or formally recognized inclusion is not matched by durable access to consequential influence. It also proposes organizational dependency as the degree to which such access remains contingent on discretionary sponsorship, gatekeeper permission, or conformity to expectations. Neither construct is presented as validated. Dependency may sometimes be legitimate because organizations necessarily differentiate expertise, accountability, and decision roles. The empirical question is whether access is systematically contingent in ways that reproduce unequal participation.

Table 2 identifies alternative pathways through which organizational inclusion may remain substantive, conditional, symbolic, or structurally constrained despite visible membership and opportunities for participation.

Table 2. Organizational Pathways from Membership to Consequential Participation

Organizational pathway	Starting condition	Critical conversion point	Possible organizational pattern	Employee-facing manifestation	Alternative explanation	Proposed diagnostic question
Belonging without voice	Employee is accepted as a legitimate member	Access to expression	Membership is socially recognized but challenge or dissent remains difficult	"I belong here, but some issues cannot realistically be raised."	Role boundaries, confidentiality, expertise requirements	Can relevant concerns reach an appropriate decision forum?
Voice without response	Employees can speak	Accountable evaluation	Input is invited but acknowledgment, explanation, or follow-through is weak	Repeated contribution with uncertain organizational reception	Workload, communication failure, competing priorities	Is there a visible process for evaluating and responding to voice?
Response without implementation	Voice receives serious consideration	Translation into action	Ideas are endorsed but stall before implementation	Positive feedback without organizational change	Feasibility, resources, sequencing, strategic conflict	What prevents endorsed input from reaching action?
Implementation without authority	A suggestion changes a decision	Durability of influence	Employee influence remains episodic and dependent on permission	Individual ideas succeed, but recurring decisions remain inaccessible	Appropriate specialization of decision rights	Does successful influence create any continuing decision capacity?
Conditional inclusion	Membership is formally or socially recognized	Independence from conformity	Access depends on fitting preferred identities or behavioral expectations	Acceptance appears contingent on self-presentation	Professional norms or task requirements	Which conditions determine whether membership remains secure?
Sponsor-dependent influence (proposed)	Employee has access through powerful allies	Independence from gatekeepers	Influence depends on advocacy by particular managers or insiders	Access expands or contracts with sponsorship	Legitimate mentorship or role-based representation	Would the same participation remain available after sponsor change?
Symbolic membership (proposed)	Inclusion is publicly visible	Conversion to consequential participation	Recognition is stronger than access to decisions or resources	Inclusion is experienced as representational rather than consequential	Early-stage organizational change	Are visible inclusion signals matched by decision access and accountability?
Structural exclusion from power	Organizational membership exists	Access to recurring authority	Decision arenas, resources, or advancement remain patterned by position or group	Persistent exclusion from consequential forums	Expertise, tenure, legal accountability, organizational design	Are authority differences explainable by legitimate role requirements?

Table note. The pathways are analytical configurations rather than stages through which all employees or organizations must pass. "Symbolic membership" and "sponsor-dependent influence" are proposed concepts requiring empirical validation. Rival explanations must be examined before interpreting a conversion failure as structural exclusion.

Proposed belonging–power framework

A relational perspective complicates any assumption that inclusion can ever be completely detached from boundaries. Inclusion and exclusion are constituted through organizational relationships and categories, making inclusion partial rather than an all-or-nothing organizational state [20]. The proposed framework therefore does not define power as the final proof of "true" belonging. Instead, it asks whether distinct forms of participation and authority are being conflated when organizations evaluate inclusion.

Inclusive leadership research offers one bridge between membership and consequential participation. Leaders describe inclusive practice not only through valuing differences but through listening to divergent contributions and leveraging them in decision processes [21]. This evidence supports attention to decision use, but leaders' descriptions do not establish that listening redistributes formal authority. Similarly, a diversity-mindset perspective suggests that information integration can enable diverse contributions while interpersonal tension can obstruct their productive use [22]. Influence conversion may therefore depend on how information is processed, not solely on whether an employee is invited to speak.

Context also changes inclusion dynamics over time. Longitudinal multilevel evidence on remote work and workplace inclusion shows that within-person and between-person relationships can differ and that contextual conditions such as gender matter [23]. This reinforces the need to avoid deriving organization-level conclusions from individual belonging at a single time point.

The proposed Belonging–Power Framework organizes four conditions: belonging and legitimate membership; voice access; influence conversion; and organizational power or resource authority. Influence conversion is a proposed umbrella construct covering whether expressed input receives accountable attention, endorsement, implementation, or other demonstrable decision consequence. Structural barriers span the pathway, while dependency captures the proposed possibility that access remains contingent on sponsorship or gatekeeper discretion. Feedback from authority to future voice and belonging is also proposed, not established.

A conversion gap can therefore occur at more than one location. Belonging without voice access concerns usable participation; voice without endorsement or accountable response concerns gatekeeping; endorsement without implementation concerns translation into action; and episodic implementation without recurring authority concerns durability. These are proposed diagnostic distinctions, not severity levels. They also need not move in one direction. Employees with substantial formal authority may experience weak belonging, while highly included specialists may appropriately possess narrow decision rights. The framework is consequently configurational: it asks which dimensions coexist, diverge, or depend on particular decision domains rather than ranking organizations on a single inclusion continuum.

This formulation also separates formal permission from substantive power. Permission to attend meetings, contribute ideas, or access consultation processes can widen participation without transferring final authority. Conversely, power need not require unilateral control; recurring agenda access, veto rights, budget discretion, delegated decision domains, or recognized authority to alter routines may represent different forms of consequential capacity. Which forms matter should be defined empirically for the occupation and decision system being studied. The proposed framework therefore requires researchers to specify the relevant decision object before claiming that an employee has or lacks organizational power.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for belonging–power framework, showing how the article’s principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

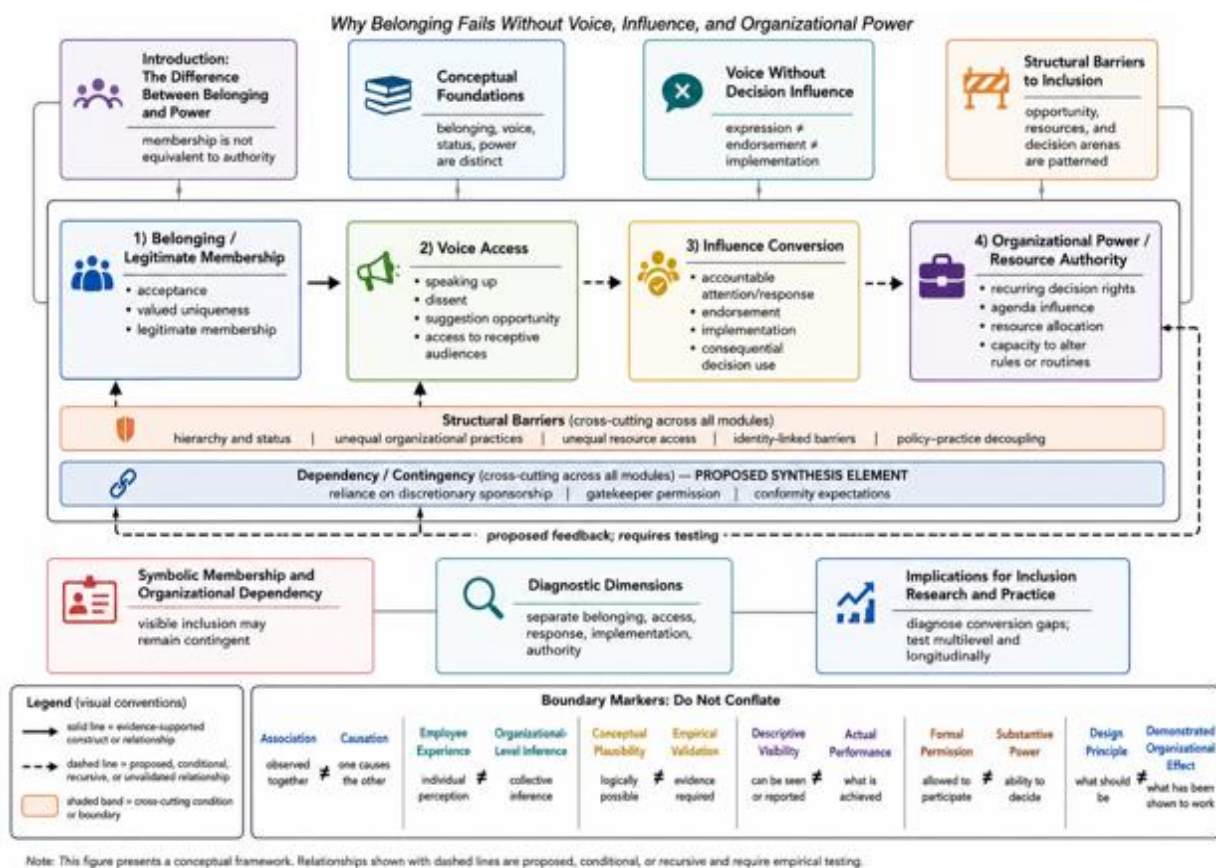


Figure 1. Belonging–Power Framework

The arrows should be interpreted as conversion questions rather than a developmental ladder. Belonging can remain valuable without progressing toward authority; not all jobs require equal decision rights; and implementation can fail for legitimate reasons. The framework becomes empirically informative only if its dimensions prove distinguishable and if patterns of conversion can be observed beyond alternative explanations such as idea quality, expertise, task interdependence, or resource scarcity.

Diagnostic dimensions

The framework requires measures that do not assume participation from sentiment alone. Recent measurement work defines voice implementation as behavior by voice targets that enacts or advocates a voiced suggestion and demonstrates that implementation is distinguishable from appreciation and endorsement [24]. This distinction makes implementation a useful diagnostic indicator of consequential uptake, but implementation still does not demonstrate durable organizational power. Measurement development must begin with construct specification rather than convenient survey items. Methodological guidance emphasizes theory-led measure development and evaluation of validity evidence [25]. A Belonging–Power

diagnostic would therefore need independent indicators for belonging, voice access, response quality, implementation, recurring decision rights, resource authority, and dependency. The proposed dimensions should be tested for discriminant validity rather than combined into an assumed maturity score.

Psychological safety provides an additional boundary. Meta-analytic evidence places psychological safety in a broad nomological network spanning individual and group contexts and shows that its relationships are shaped by contextual and methodological conditions [26]. Safety may support interpersonal risk taking and voice, but it should not be treated as direct evidence that employees possess organizational authority. A defensible diagnostic approach must distinguish implementation from adjacent responses, establish construct validity, and test relevant multilevel or contextual boundaries [24-26].

The diagnostic logic is consequently comparative rather than classificatory. Researchers could examine where conversion differs across roles, identities, teams, decision types, and time without assuming a preferred universal distribution. Organizations could trace whether issues receive acknowledgment, accountable evaluation, explanation, implementation when warranted, and access to escalation. Such observations are indicators to be validated, not readiness criteria.

Table 3 translates the Belonging–Power Framework into a research and organizational diagnostic agenda designed to distinguish observable conditions from untested interpretations.

Table 3. Diagnostic Questions, Falsification Tests, and Organizational Responsibilities

Diagnostic domain	Core diagnostic question	Evidence that would strengthen the inference	Evidence that would weaken the inference	Appropriate organizational responsibility	Main misuse risk	Current readiness
Belonging	Do members experience legitimate acceptance without requiring identity suppression?	Consistent reports across groups, time, and contexts	Large variation hidden by aggregate scores	Examine membership conditions and subgroup differences	Treating positive sentiment as proof of equality	Established construct; framework use requires contextualization
Voice access	Can employees raise consequential issues through usable channels?	Actual use, accessibility, escalation options, absence of predictable retaliation	Channels exist but are inaccessible, unused, or procedurally weak	Maintain credible routes for expression	Counting channels instead of usable access	Measurable, but context dependent
Response quality (<i>proposed diagnostic dimension</i>)	Does voice receive acknowledgment, evaluation, and reasoned disposition?	Traceable responses and understandable decision rationales	Repeated disappearance of input without explanation	Make evaluation processes visible where appropriate	Equating responsiveness with agreement	Requires operational development
Influence conversion (<i>proposed</i>)	Does employee input alter options, decisions, or implementation?	Decision traces linking input to consequential change	Expression produces no detectable decision consequence	Distinguish consultation from actual influence	Assuming every suggestion deserves implementation	Requires construct validation
Power and authority	Who possesses recurring decision rights and resource discretion?	Role, governance, budget, agenda, and delegation data	Reliance only on perceived empowerment	Clarify authority boundaries and accountability	Treating authority differences as automatically unjust	Requires decision-specific measurement
Dependency (<i>proposed</i>)	Does influence remain available without discretionary sponsorship?	Influence survives leadership or network changes	Access disappears when particular gatekeepers change	Reduce unnecessary person-dependent bottlenecks	Treating all sponsorship as illegitimate	Requires longitudinal and network testing
Structural barrier	Are conversion gaps patterned across groups, roles, or organizational locations?	Persistent disparities after credible rival explanations are tested	Gaps disappear after accounting for role, expertise, or decision type	Investigate allocation and decision processes	Inferring discrimination from descriptive gaps alone	Requires multilevel evidence
Framework validity	Are belonging, voice, influence, and power empirically distinguishable?	Reliable measures, discriminant validity, replicated patterns	Dimensions collapse or add little explanatory value	Permit independent evaluation and revision	Treating the framework as already validated	Conceptual only; empirical testing required

Decision readiness	Is evidence sufficient for prescriptive organizational action?	Replication, contextual robustness, intervention or quasi-experimental evidence	Findings remain correlational, context specific, or measurement dependent	Match action strength to evidence strength	Converting conceptual plausibility into policy certainty	No universal readiness threshold
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Table note. The table is an original diagnostic synthesis. It specifies questions, potential falsification conditions, and organizational responsibilities without creating scores, maturity levels, effect estimates, or implementation thresholds. “Response quality,” “influence conversion,” and “dependency” require empirical development before they can function as validated diagnostic constructs.

Implications for inclusion research and practice

Research on influence should move beyond counting who speaks. Voice inquiry—expressing improvement-oriented ideas in a questioning form—can affect endorsement through leader sense of power, with effects contingent on leader dominance [27]. The implication is not that employees should adopt submissive communication to accommodate powerful leaders. Rather, interactional form and gatekeeper characteristics belong in models of how voice is converted into response.

Belonging also involves agency under conditions of exclusion. Qualitative research with Asian American and Asian Canadian professionals during COVID-19 shows how workers actively countered workplace racial violence and identity denial [28]. This context-specific evidence cautions against representing belonging as something organizations simply grant. Employees can claim membership, resist imposed identities, and contest the terms of inclusion, while still facing structural constraints that require separate analysis.

Voice outcomes are also socially and operationally conditional. Experience-sampling and dyadic evidence indicates that the relationship between employee voice and coworker support depends on job demands and coworker voice expectations [29]. Consequently, neither positive nor negative responses to voice should be interpreted independently of workload, expectations, relationships, and task conditions.

A stronger empirical program would also examine accountability after non-implementation. A rejected proposal does not by itself indicate failed inclusion, but repeated absence of reasons, opaque routing, inconsistent standards, or inaccessible escalation may reveal a different organizational process than reasoned rejection. Researchers could therefore compare the content and timeliness of responses, not merely implementation rates. This would help distinguish legitimate prioritization from patterned gatekeeping without assuming that employee preferences should govern every decision.

Practice implications should likewise remain role sensitive. Organizations may reasonably centralize decisions involving legal accountability, scarce capital, safety, or specialized expertise, while still making consultation and response procedures transparent. The proposed framework does not prescribe equal power; it asks whether the boundaries of authority are intelligible, contestable where appropriate, and consistent with stated inclusion commitments. That distinction protects the framework from turning a conceptual critique of symbolic participation into an unsupported mandate for universal decentralization.

For research, the framework prioritizes longitudinal, multilevel, event-level, network, qualitative, and quasi-experimental designs. Studies should trace specific voice episodes from expression through response and implementation, while separately measuring recurring decision rights and resource control. Comparative tests should examine identities, occupations, hierarchies, work arrangements, national institutions, and decision types. The framework should be challenged if its proposed dimensions collapse empirically or if rival explanations account for apparent conversion gaps.

For practice, the contribution is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Organizations can examine whether inclusion claims are accompanied by usable channels, accountable responses, transparent reasons for rejection, feasible escalation routes, and identifiable decision rights. They should not assume that higher belonging scores prove influence, nor that every influence gap is unjustified. Expertise, accountability, legal duties, strategic coordination, and resource scarcity can legitimately differentiate authority. The relevant responsibility is to make consequential participation observable enough to evaluate rather than to promise universal power sharing.

Conclusion

Belonging is an important organizational condition, but it answers a different question from whether employees can speak consequentially, influence decisions, or exercise durable authority. This Original Conceptual Framework Article proposes the Belonging–Power Framework to preserve those distinctions through four analytically separate conditions: belonging and legitimate membership, voice access, influence conversion, and organizational power or resource authority. It further proposes structural barriers and dependency as cross-cutting conditions that may constrain movement among these domains.

The framework's contribution is conceptual rather than evidentiary proof of a universal sequence. Membership can be authentic without conferring authority; voice can be valuable even when a suggestion is rejected; implementation can occur

without altering recurring decision rights; and differentiated authority may reflect legitimate expertise or accountability rather than exclusion. These alternatives are integral to the framework rather than exceptions to it.

Future evaluation must therefore test whether the proposed dimensions are empirically distinct, whether conversion gaps persist after plausible rival explanations are considered, and how patterns vary across levels, identities, organizational contexts, and time. Until such evidence exists, the framework should be used as a research architecture for asking where inclusion becomes consequential, not as a validated diagnostic, causal model, or organizational prescription.

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