

**The Role Of Engagement And Trust In Organizational Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion  
Practices**

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## **Abstract**

Employees belief and employer reality on an all-inclusive working environment are in continuous conflict. Such conflicting perceptions within an organization can hinder positive results in staff development, recruitment, engagement, and retainment of employees, and ultimately the overall performance of the organization. The problem addressed by this research was the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. This research utilized the social exchange theory via the leader member exchange that originated from Bauer and Greene for focusing on relationship, the social interactive exchanges, and attitudes between leaders and subordinates or team members. The research employed the qualitative case study methodology. The purposive selection strategy was incorporated where 12 participants were voluntarily retrieved from the sample population who were mid-level leaders and non-leaders with a healthcare setting. They were exposed to in-depth interview with structured open-end questions which were subjected to the scrutiny of EDI professionals. The research findings highlighted that workplace inclusion and engagement thrive on daily interactions and reciprocal relationships among employees, as trust reinforces a sense of psychological safety that is critical for authentic engagement. The implication on inclusivity, trust and engagement between leader and member showed that the participants motivation and satisfaction were strongly linked to how connected they felt. The research encourages organizations to recognize that trust manifests differently between leader and member relationships, and the potency of supporting both avenues via activities where employee's connection bandwidth can go beyond groups and hierarchical boundaries, allowing bonds of trust to continuously evolve towards fostering a more engage workforce. While this research proved to be effective to retrieved insightful data from the targeted population, broader sampling that

includes participants from a variety of demographic backgrounds and intersectional identities will deepen understanding of how inclusion and exclusion are experienced differently across groups.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Studies fueled with the underlining desire geared towards the advancement of their practice knowledge to actively configuring supportive resources in parallel with the needs of the workforce that differs in ethnicity, generation, and culture, (Jamshid et al, 2022), were conducted to improve operation that cultivates, sustains, and echoes an all-inclusiveness working environment. Such studies included the impact from Chief Human Resource Officers who are equipped with cultural intelligence and awareness; role of senior leadership to get returns from diversity; social justice via leaders' diversity beliefs, job satisfaction, employee happiness, and managerial practices in a diversity climate, (Jamshid, et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022; Turner & Merriman, 2022). While such studies with varying theoretical concepts via relationship and practices aimed at diversity and inclusion exist, there seems to be lacking insights into workplace inclusivity via employee work engagement, and trust between mid-level leaders and employees. As employees continued to believe inclusivity is not equally experienced in their work setting, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). This study posits that employee's belief and employer reality of the working environment are in constant conflict, and the possibility that employee's perception and/or leadership behavioral practice is the root, cannot be ignore. Such looming convictions can unconstructively influence employee's perception and employers efforts on continuous diversity management initiatives, for example, targeting hiring of individuals such as women and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) who are identified as a part of the subgroups of the underrepresented, (Hoang et al., 2022, Martins, 2020), from the employees' perception the process formulation of such initiative may be established or rigged to the prioritizations of the marginalized groups having advantageous opportunities in the working environment over others, (Hoang et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023).

Leaders in their decision-making and functioning ability are delegated with the fulfilment of the objectives of their employer. Such authority offers leaders a level of independence in the allocation of resources that is possible through collective social exchanges among the citizens of the workforce where knowledge is transferred to current and future employees through education and training, (Ma et al., 2022). Social exchanges are known to be an influential driver in job satisfaction, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022), and on the perceptions of the employees, (Rezai et al., 2023). Inputs from leaders may impact employee's behavior professionally and personally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022), as these relationships engagements contribute to perception of inclusion, (Rezai et al., 2023). Thus, cultivating and maintaining good relationships within the working environment are critical to the operational health of the inner workings of the environment.

In the pursuit of practice evolution on inclusion in the working environment, this study is gear towards expanding current knowledge of the social exchange theory (SET) via the leader member exchange (LMX) principle through an investigation into the interactive or social exchanges between midlevel leadership and employees to better understand the unalignment of equity, diversity, and inclusive (EDI) within the working, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023).

## Statement of the Problem

Employees belief and employer reality on an all-inclusive working environment are in continuous conflict. Therefore, the problem addressed, was the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. Such conflicting perceptions within the organization can hinder positive results in staff development, recruitment, engagement, and retainment of employees, and ultimately the overall performance of the organization, (Sweeting, 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al, 2023). Leadership being one of the core components of the organization functional infrastructure, (Kang et al., 2023; Sweeting, 2023), have regular interactions with employees to assist in the navigation of the internal happenings of the working environment, as they provide additional knowledge, (kang et al, 2023; To et al, 2024, Turi et al, 2022). Therefore, an investigation into the interactive exchanges between midlevel leadership and employees can offer insights into employee perceptions formation about their reality of the working environment not being inclusive to all. A supporting analysis to determine whether a diversity climate of integrity exist or not, regardless of the employees' homogeneousness, (Ward-Bartlett et al., 2023), can contribute to improving recruitment, engagement, and retention of a diverse workforce and positively fostering an inclusivity perception of the working environment (To et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024), which are essential to achieveing organizational goals. This study can bridge the gap between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees providing expanded knowledge in addressing these misalignments, which can lead to a more cohesive and effective working environment; and ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance. If not addressed, then there is a forfeit to better understand what contributes to these misaligned perceptions, and

the development of strategies to align organizational practices with the inclusive goals of EDI initiatives.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. As individuals remain less likely to engage if they perceive the organization values and objectives as not in alignment with their own expectations, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Inputs from leaders can impact employee's behavior professionally and personally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022), as these relationships engagements contribute to perception of inclusion, (Rezai et al., 2023). Thus, the research questions will aid in the exploration of understanding the extent work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employee influences inclusivity, as work engagement and trust are necessary elements in working relationships to stimulate constructive and beneficial working environment in the organization, (Haryanto et al., 2023; Wushe & Shenje, 2019).

This case study utilized in-depth interview with structured open-end questions for the data collection instrument to gather thick rich and insightful data towards the development of a coding scheme via the thematic analysis for connecting data and concept to build a valid research study into why behaviors by mid-level leaders and employees are not in alignment with the organizational EDI practices. Thus, the purposive selection strategy was incorporated, as the focus group of the study included clinical and non-clinical employees who were mid-level leaders and non-leaders conveniently accessible in the laboratory and pathology department

within a healthcare setting, for the investigation of engagement and trust where synergistic relationship between employees and leaders exist to navigate and accomplish their work.

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

The SET via LMX principle was leveraged to gain broader insights into the dynamics of mid-level leadership and employees' relationship. Origin from Bauer and Greene, (1996) is still one of the leading theories known for focusing on relationship, the social interactive exchanges, and attitudes between leaders and subordinates or team members, (Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). Inclusivity in the workplace is cultivated via individual relationships and employer factors such as leadership and practices, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023), as relationships contributions at work influence inclusivity perception, whereas leaders as agents of the employer are inclusion climate creators, (Jerónimo et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). With LMX the forecast of employee engagement can be develop, as employee work engagement have been known to be significantly impacted from the quality of LMX produce between parties of the relationship, (Khair et al., 2024; Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022; Wagner & Koob, 2022). Interactions within LMX relationships are of low and high quality where there is a balance or imbalance of information exchanges that increase or decrease trust and engagement among the parties, (Khair et al., 2024). With this notion, the study posit that when employees experience the reciprocity from leaders incorporating their inputs from the interactive exchanges into decisions that impacts the working environment, (Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011); trust within the relationship and environment will be establish, (Jerónimo et al., 2022).

Work engagement and trust are necessary elements in working relationships to stimulate constructive and beneficial working environment in the organization, (Haryanto et al., 2023;

Wushe & Shenje, 2019). These relationships engagements contribute to perception of inclusion, (Rezai et al., 2023), where leaders are critical to workplace inclusive culture, (Jerónimo et al., 2022), as their inputs can impact employee's behavior professionally and personally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022). Despite this belief, employees continues to believe inclusivity is not equally experienced in their work setting, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). To better understand what the enablers to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees are, the focus is on the role engagement and trust plays in social interactive exchanges between mid-level leadership and employees relationship to foster a working environment of inclusivity. The SET via the LMX offered the prospect to access insights into the process of how employees' assess their interactions and relationships with the leaders, and why they feel the way they do as it relates to inclusivity in the working environment. The SET is widely used for the realization of employees' allegiance to their employer via their relationships and interactive exchanges that reflects some level of reciprocated trust, (Bauer & Greene, 1996; Nachmias et al., 2022).

### **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design**

The study investigation was to understand to what extent does work engagement and trust between mid-level leaders and employees influences the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and live experiences of leadership and employees. The case study approach was employed to analyzed the live experiences as an ongoing process within the environment, utilizing various bases of substantiation, to observe and rationalize what is happening, (Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022). This study recognized that despite the complexities in sub-departmental components, job functions, cultures, and subcultures within the potential research environment, employees and mid-level leaders are connected via their shared experiences that impacts them

personally and professionally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Haryanto et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). Thus, in compliant with the qualitative research parameters of case study, the researcher was the designated instrument for the data collection via interviews with structured open-end questions, along with field notes on observation during the interviews, (Adler, 2022). Allowing broader flexibilities to access and investigate the disconnect of current organizational EDI's desired expectations and live experiences of leadership and employees; documenting narratives to highlight similarities and dissimilarities responses from the group under the study in relation to engagement and trust influences to inclusivity in the working environment via the day-to-day happenings.

The case study approach was blended with the thematic analysis that involved searching for patterns or developing themes from raw data of lived experiences via inductive and deductive logic to understand these experiences, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The theme or pattern generation process entailed the listing and preliminary grouping, reduction, and elimination via back-and-forth review of the data that ultimately identified interpretive and descriptive elements via the help of NVivo software application, (Naeem et al., 2024). This was an opportunity to capture and leverage these live experiences from the relationship dynamics for rich insightful data to understand why behaviors by mid-level leaders and employees are not in alignment with the organizational EDI practices. The potential to incorporate mixed method studies in the event qualitative literature was limited to the study focus, was considered.

## **Research Questions**

### ***RQ1***

What role does work engagement between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic inclusive working environment?

### ***RQ2***

What role does trust between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic inclusive working environment?

### ***RQ3***

How does inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment?

## **Significance of the Study**

An exploration into the interactive exchanges between midlevel leadership and employees to unearth deeper understandings into employee perceptions formation about their reality of the working environment not being inclusive to all. Insights into whether a diversity climate of integrity exist or not, regardless of the employees' homogeneousness, (Ward-Bartlett et al., 2023), can aid leadership to strategically navigate EDI practices and choose practices that enhances inclusivity for an authentic all inclusive working environment (To et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024), and simultaneously contribute to the continuous human resource practices of improving recruitment, engagement, and retention of employees who make up a diverse workforce. Such continuous efforts are essential to achieving desired organizational EDI goals, as EDI perception on inclusivity can be negatively impacted from inconsistency being reflected from organizational EDI communications, policies, and the actual experiences by employees and leadership, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Thus, understanding and addressing these misalignments via the analysis of engagement and trust between leader and employee relationship, can lead to a

more cohesive and effective working environment, ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance. Bridging the gap between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***Perception of Inclusivity***

The existence of an environment where regardless of individual differences, all are seen as valuable with genuine inputs with the capabilities to partake in decision-making process that impacts infrastructure policies and practices of operations, (Dhanani et al., 2024; Randel et al., 2018).

## **Summary**

Employees belief and employer reality of the working environment are in constant conflict due to the unalignment of EDI's within the working. The problem that was addressed through this study, was that organizational EDI's desired expectations for an all-inclusive working environment, are not aligning with those of leadership and employees. Bridging the gap between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees, fostering an authentic inclusive environment. As such conflicting perceptions within the organization can hinder positive results in staff development, recruitment, engagement, and retainment of employees, and ultimately the overall performance of the organization, (Sweeting, 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. This study was geared towards expanding current knowledge of the social exchange theory via leader member exchange principle as it offered the

prospect to access insights into the process of how employees assess their interactions and relationships with the leaders, and why they feel the way they do as it relates to inclusivity in the working environment.

The case study approach was blended with the thematic analysis that involves searching for patterns or developing themes from the raw data via inductive and deductive logic, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020), with the assistance from NVivo software application, (Naeem et al., 2024) to answer the research questions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed, was the misalignment of organizational equity diversity and inclusive desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. As conflicting perception between employee's belief and employer reality on an all-inclusive working environment can overshadow continuous efforts on diversity management initiatives aimed towards positive results in staff development, recruitment, engagement, and retainment of employees, and ultimately the overall performance of the organization, (Sweeting, 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al, 2023). Thus, this qualitative case study investigated the interactive exchanges between midlevel leadership and employees to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. As the advocacy for inclusion is through constant interactive exchanges in the workplace that are fashioned by employees' daily practices and experiences, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023). Leaders being culturally aware are critical to effectively engage with the workforce to promote and cultivate an organizational culture of inclusion in their working environment, (Hoang et al., 2022). Yet findings highlighted that the presences of inconsistency in aligning policies and practices on diversity and inclusion between organization and lived experienced of employees continues to dwell in the working environment, (Jeronimo., et al, 2022; Morin & Burrell, 2024). Thus, the literature on social exchange theory (SET) via the leader member exchange (LMX) relationship dynamics, was exploited to understand and explain the role work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employees plays in fostering an authentic inclusive working environment. The research scope of the literature was narrowed according to the following search parameters via peer reviewed journal articles; (a) key search

terms such as diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) and equity diversity and inclusion (EDI), employee perception, attitudes and belief of work place inclusivity, inclusivity perception, social inclusion, belonging, tokenism; (b) by key words or phrases such as diversity climate, diversity in organization, trust and engagement in working relationship, social relations, and (c) filtered by subject such as work engagement, diversity inclusion policies, DEI, social support, management, employee attitudes and relations, organization behavior and trust.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social exchange theory (SET) was utilized in understanding behavioral exchanges and social relations within the working environment. SET has been formulated into phases of responsive actions that incorporates (a) an exchange instigation phase to the potential trustee by the trustor, (b) a social response phase via reciprocity from the trustee, and (c) a formation of relationship between trustor and trustee, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Thus, the social exchange relationship starts off with small exchange interactions to reflect measure of trust to stimulate relationships of reciprocity; which over time ultimately leads to the fostering of increased confidence of trust and safety via the continuation of reciprocity facilitation or interactive engagement reflective of a giving and receiving outlook via the active fulfilment of future obligation and an established relationship, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Seo et al, 2018; Shore et al., 2012). While reciprocity is the core element guiding SET, there is the prudence on the equivalent expectation between the said parties of the leader member relationship, (Imam et al., 2023). As SET emphasized that as the relationship progresses, parties of the relationship assess the pros and cons related to reciprocity from the interaction, influencing the level and type of exchanges to be had, as exchanges varies in value (Blau, 1964; Umrani et al., 2024), Therefore, parties are very self-conscious of their interactions with each

other. The concept of social behavior as exchanges originated from Homans, (1958), which they further expanded upon in the 1960's to reflect that social behavior as being instrumental behavior, (Ahmad et al., 2023), and additionally in the realization of people's allegiance to their employer, where constructive or unconstructive efforts during interactive exchanges yields positive or negative relationships, (Tauetsile, 2021). These relationships engagements are progressively expanding and contributing to the perception of inclusion in the workplace, (Rezai et al., 2023), leaders are critical to workplace inclusive culture, (Jerónimo et al., 2022), as their inputs can impact employee's behavior professionally and personally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2022). Consequently, with the constant conflict between organization reality and employee perception on EDI in the working environment, the SET must undergo an expansion of knowledge to navigate the complexities of the organizations desire EDI goals and the lived experiences of employees, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2019).

The SET via leader member exchange (LMX) principle with its origination from Bauer and Greene, (1996) is still one of the leading theories known for focusing on relationship, the social interactive exchanges, and attitudes between leaders and subordinates or team members, (Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). The exchange contributions in working relationships originated from Blau in 1964 who expanded upon the scholar Barnard's notion of "exchange of utilities" by broadening the focus on the type of exchange relationships being fostered between employees and their organization to represent more than economic benefits, (Shore et al., 2012). These exchanges within the working relationships are explicitly economic and socially implicit, stemming from the expressed or implied expected obligations between the involve parties. Exchanges that are economic specific are reinforced with contractual formalities to ensure performance, whereas social exchanges are implied unspecific favors of fairness in the

rendering of future obligations. These exchanges are heavily depended on the establishment of trust as exchanges are done on the self-assurance that parties involved will indulge in matched reciprocation. The conviction of trust amongst employees is necessary to stimulate openly progressive working relationships within the environment of the organization, while simultaneously having perceptive expectations to rely on others to reciprocate share exchanges of trust, (Hafiz Ghufuran et al., 2022; Imam et al., 2023). Thus, the LMX doctrine on the eminence of rapport between leaders and their subordinates is entrenched through social interactive exchange processes, making the development of employee engagement forecast likely, as employee work engagement has been known to be significantly impacted from the quality of LMX produce between the parties of the relationship, (Khair et al., 2024; Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022; Wagner & Koob, 2022).

Despite the acknowledgment on the necessity of work engagement and trust to stimulate interactive exchanges in working relationships, (Haryanto et al., 2023; Wushe & Shenje, 2019) that ultimately leads to good standing relationships that improves work performance, (Aggarwal et al., 2020), and confidence in their employer, (Haryanto et al., 2023). Interactions within LMX relationships were found to be either of low (base on formal transactions) or high (presence of felt support and motivation) quality where there is a balance or imbalance of information exchanges that increase or decrease trust and engagement among the parties of the relationship, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Jawahar et al, 2019; Khair et al., 2024). The identification on the quality level of engagement and trust being experienced from the product result of the relationship seems to contradict the aim of the LMX in fostering mutually beneficial relationships that improves employee's performance and confidence in their employer. As the quality type of the relationship delivers exchanges of engagement and trust that are categorized as in-groups where

full mutually interaction occurs and out-groups where there is possibly inequity of interaction or exchanges. Resulting in engagement deterioration from individuals who are categorized as being in the out-group, as individuals were found to be less likely to engage if they perceive the organizational values and objectives are not in alignment with their own expectations, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Whether such influence stems from expected organizational practices or lived experiences should be considered, as the insights into the reasoning for such variation of interactive exchanges can provide insights into potential enablers of unaligned EDI expectations. Since LMX differentiation raises the question about social comparison being experienced within the working environment and the impact on perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, (Seo et al., 2018). One of the critical roles of leaders in the working environment involves the process of aligning and motivating employees to collaborate with each other, and the management of these relationships. Lacking the ability to foster team spirit amongst employees can unconsciously invoke perceptions of discrimination, preferentialism, and resentment from them, (Hayes et al., 2020). Such conflicting perception can impact how employees view their organization and leaders' commitment to progressive EDI practices, which ultimately can cause a negative ripple effect to the behavior and knowledge exchange between leader and employees relationships, via their engagement and the reciprocity of trust in fostering inclusivity within the working environment, (Wushe & Shenje, 2019), as employee experiences within their working environment can stem from influence by leaders, (Seo et al., 2018).

### **Intentional Inclusion can Inadvertently Reflect Exclusion.**

Inclusivity of diverse employees is currently trending as an essential component for the creation of effective EDI practices as they are the recipient, (Buengeler et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Despite the nudging on the importance of continuous efforts

to mitigate the colliding of the organizational standard of operations, policies, practices, and employee perceptions of inclusion. The momentum behind EDI has found it challenging to produce consistent effective diversity practices, (Bernstein et al, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nishii et al., 2018), as studies on efforts to expand diversity practices in organizations unearthed their respective impact to either authentically creating, improving, or merely signaling, or deceptive inclusion in the working environment, (Arif et al., 2023; Adamson et al., 2021; Bernstein et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2024; Dover et al., 2020; ; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Nishii, 2018; Scarborough et al., 2019; Wilton et al., 2020). Bernstein et al., (2020) focus of inclusion lead to the incorporation of employees lived experiences into organizational processes and culture where employees are actively involved in critical organizational processes. Dawson et al., (2024) in their studies expanded further on inclusion to identified that this phenomenon is very action-oriented involving elements for the creation of an inclusive supportive working environment via the active participation from the employees. That is, for there to be integration of differences, inclusion must be seen as far beyond the commonly recognized attributes associated with diversity such age, ethnicity, skin color, nationality and the likes that has traditionally be used to differentiate underrepresented groups, (Bernstein et al., 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Scarborough et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2018; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Follow by countering exclusion via the ability to balance the differentiation and uniqueness of others and of self to minimize exhibiting exclusionary behaviors that would seem to render perceptions of not belonging or incompetence upon others and self, (Dawson et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023; Howard et al., 2020). However, prior study recognized that exclusion is also a phenomenon that is very action oriented that can be unintended or intentional dependent on the way exclusion may be used, (Adamson et al., 2021;

Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Shore & Chung, 2023). If not careful, both leaders and employees can find themselves indulging in exclusionary actions as a way to preserve social control within the working environment particularly within groups or teams with the purpose to govern, regulate or address disagreements or disruption in the advancement of goal achievement, (Adamson et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2023; Wang & Li, 2018), or even the control of access to power, economic resources, promotion, and professional development, (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). But such application of exclusion can destabilize the fostering of a diversity environment and the inclusiveness of different voices of view-points. As employees who perceive themselves as liked or accepted by their leaders and team members; might be unconsciously or consciously indulging in social exclusionary behaviors to preserve the inclusion of the group or their own inclusive prominence, (Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2018). Impacting employees of the out-group well-being for felt inclusion and belonging via their perception of inequity practices that curtails the ability to operate and function within the working environment as their true authentic self without having to sacrifice part(s) of their distinctiveness, or feelings of being excluded, (Dawson et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023).

Thus, inclusion in the working environment is dependent of all parties voluntarily and actively contributing to the fostering of an inclusive environment, (Buengeler et al., 2018; Dawson et al, 2024; Shore et al, 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023), as leaders interactive exchanges may or may not match the intentions of organizational EDI goals for a more inclusive working environment, (Shore & Chung, 2023). With this notion, this study features the definition of inclusion as the intentional incorporation of equitable policies and practices into the diverse ongoing processes and perceptions that intertwine with organizational internal infrastructure such

as systems, structure, culture and standard of operations, (Adamson et al., 2021; Arif et al., 2023; Ferdman, 2014). As employee perception of inclusiveness in the working environment is an environment where regardless of individual differences, all are seen as valuable with genuine inputs with the capabilities to partake in decision-making process that impacts internal infrastructure policies and practices of operations, (Dhanani et al., 2024; Fujimoto et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018). But inclusion may be perceived differently depending on the individual and the environment, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferman, 2017), for example, some employees who are perceived as being included may be a token inclusion that is reflective of a historically disadvantage group, (Adamson et al., 2021; Wilton et al., 2020). The view of inclusiveness influences their performance and commitment to the organization, ultimately the overall organizational performance, (Arif et al., 2023; Cho & Barak, 2008; Tauetsile, 2021). For the employees, feeling inclusive must equate to feelings of acceptance and respect in their environment of work, (Dawson et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2023). Influencing employee perceived insider status (PIS) of belonging to the organization where they feel acknowledged and appreciated, (Naseer et al., 2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023), and being connected with the inner workings such as being able to contribute to and participate in processes and decisions making towards operational infrastructures of the organization, (Liu et al, 2022). While PIS is a reflection of employees perception of themselves within the environment of the organization, (Naseer et al., 2023), it is also connected to SET as it echoes how leaders who are agents of the organization, influences how employees' perceive themselves within the workings of the organization and the working environment, (Buengeler et al., 2018; Naseer et al., 2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023). Leaders in their role capacity within the workplaces have the potential to influence inclusive perceptions via their shared demonstration of commitment to DEI initiatives

and strategies of the organization, and through the fostering and nurturing of a quality-exchange relationship with employees, (Arif et al., 2023; Ferdman, 2014, p.4; Liu et al, 2022; Seo et al., 2018, Shore & Chung 2023; Woods et al, 2024). Thus, the presence of inclusivity in the leader and employee relationship is consequently an essential component of the live experiences of employee inclusion perception and felt belongingness, (Dawson et al., 2024; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Rezai et al., 2023).

Relationships such as the leader and employee can capitalize on employee preferences and what stimulates them, (Dawson et al., 2024; Dover et al., 2020) to improve and align organizational EDI practices and leader, and employee lived experiences. As both leaders and employees have cultivated their own self preconceive notion or well created beliefs on the current organizational EDI practices; impacting their perceptions and their interactive engagement in the working environment, (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner & koob, 2022). For example, current EDI practices that may have undergone a makeover that revised policies and procedures impacting how decision are made, processes, and systems, but on the other hand they are not as impactful to the already standardized everyday working relationships, (Adamson et al., 2021), which can be the bases of exclusionary behavioral activities. As individuals within these relationships may consciously or unconsciously indulging in discriminatory behaviors where they prefer to collaborate or partner with employees they are constantly working with or more socially familiar with. Which can be antagonizing to individuals and detrimental to relationships, impacting productivity, and obstructing organizational assurance on the fostering of an inclusive working environment via establish EDI practices, (Hayes et al., 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023; Wang & Li, 2018). While current organizational EDI initiatives or practices may enhance its brand and become appealing to current and potential employees expecting inclusion,

unintended felt exclusion may be projecting and gesturing towards other employees in the working environment, as employees tend to believe organizations through their leaders' relay what the current working environment is really like. For example, as noted by Dover, (2020), fostering inclusiveness via the communication of intentional EDI practices have an unintended social psychological side in where current EDI initiatives operating in the working environment may ignite preconceived notions of equality for employees categorized as members of minority groups, but inequality for employees categorized as members of dominant groups, or vice versa stirring up unintended emotions of exclusions and biasness, (Hayes et al., 2020; Mansoor et al., 2021; Leslie, 2019). Thus, creating conflicting signals for both leaders and employees, where their perception and assumptions of equality and inequality are in conflict, causing the claims and detection of fairness or unfairness to become distorted, (Jordan et al., 2019). Igniting further concerns amongst employees about the root and creators of the organization EDI policies or practices, (Jordan et al., 2019), as some employees may perceive the creation of the EDI initiatives as merely a lawful reflective ploy to depict a diverse working environment that incorporate diverse voices, when in their perception that is not the reality of the working environment, (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Sabharwal, 2014), or the creators' intentions were simply rooted in authenticity. Employee inclusiveness perception can be the reflection of the quality of LMX, as leaders can influence their followers via positive synergistic efforts and role-modeling behavior that depicts their shared principles, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al., 2018; Epitropaki et al., 2017), which was reinforced through consistency of authentic portrayal of leadership practices and behaviors in their actions and endeavors (Arif et al., 2023). Thus, organizational EDI communications via leaders' actions can be influential in fueling employee engagement, as these interactions can reveal the core intentions of the organization EDI goals.

## **Trust Empowerment is Relational to the Interactive Exchanges Between Employees within the Working Environment.**

Trust is established when parties involved in relationships consciously make the decision to extend a measure of good faith that each party will mutually participate in share return of interactive exchanges. Trust is seen as a system of shared expectations and the emotional need for connectedness and belonging in relationships or groups within their environment, (Batmomin el al., 2022; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020; Shore et al., 2011; Wagner & Koob, 2022). Therefore, within an organization trust cannot be cultivated without relationships and the maturity of trust implicitly stipulates continuous maintenance of knowledge acquisition via observation and active inputs, and the understanding that the modification of trust is possible between the parties as a result of the constant changes of times, events, and environments, (Blau, 1964; Gustafsson et al., 2021; Reynolds & Lander, 2024; Umrani et al., 2024). And in the process protecting the established trust that the relationship is anchored in, while simultaneously allowing the flexibility for the contents of the exchanges to align with the shifting needs of the parties. Employees' evaluations and perceptions on the trustworthiness of the organization weigh a lot on its transparency of integrity, capabilities to accomplish its goals, the invested care and addressing of employees' concerns, such as the fairness in EDI management, (Bal et al., 2010; Li et al., 2019; Mansoor et al., 2021; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Wilton et al., 2020). As the perception of trust in their organization is influenced by various members of the organization such as leadership and colleagues, and core structural components such as systems, standards of operation, main and sub-cultures, (Gustafsson et al., 2021; Reynolds & Lander, 2024), all of which are regulated and govern via relationships. According to Kahn (1990), the establishment of trust in the working environment is relational as it is influenced by conditions, interactions and

organizational practices, (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner & Koob, 2022). Prominent studies of trust by Mayer et al., (1995) identified three characteristics in relation to its establishment, that is, the trust's quality is conditional to parties' ability or proficiency, goodwill, and reliability, (Gustafsson et al., 2021; Reynolds & Lander, 2024; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). Mayer et al., (1995) standard for trust quality is similar to the SET phases of responsive actions for empowering the reciprocity of trust and safety via interactive engagement and relationships, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Seo et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2012). While McAllister, (1995) identifies that the foundations for the perception of trust is more about filling the emotional tendencies of individuals that influences their trust such as morals, caring etc, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020; Reynolds & Lander, 2024). Since the reciprocity of trust is influence through the quality of exchanges and interactions via relationships perception, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Hafiz Ghufuran et al., 2022; Jawahar et al., 2019; Khair et al., 2024), continuous expansion on trust has led to the identification of generalized and particularized trust, (Schilke et al., 2021) in the perspective of social interactions.

A doable degree of trust must be present in every environment of social interactions for there to be some bandwidth for relationship functionality and evolution to align with constant changes internal and external of the environment, (Gustafsson et al., 2021). The willingness to trust others before getting to know them or cultivating a relationship, signals that there may be an instinctive need for social interactions and production of social exchanges between individuals, employee and employee; and employer and employee to unfold, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020). A reflection of the social exchange theory of relationship where it starts off with small exchange interactions exposing some extent of trust to incite relationship(s) of possible reciprocity; which over time ultimately leads to the fostering of increased confidence of trust and safety via the

established relationship(s), (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Seo et al, 2018; Shore et al., 2012). Thus, this generalized trust was rooted in the trustor's past and current experiences to formulate whether the potential trustee should receive added measures of trust during the life of the relationship, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2021; Schilke et al., 2021). Thus, employees may hold generalized trust in the organization or with their leaders which goes through constant evaluations as both the leader-member and organizational relationship mature or deteriorate, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020), as trust levels were influenced base on the inference from the context and social interactions within the environment, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Kahn, 1990; Seo et al, 2018; Shore et al., 2012). Leaders' relationship with their employees can also be based on particularized trust as they have distinguishing relationship with each employee, where the relationship can either be situational and relational as it goes through constant ongoing evaluation, (Blau, 1964; Aggarwal et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2023; Umrani et al., 2024). Signifying that trust can be used as a motivational tool in exchange for future performance and impactful to employees' perceptions. Alluding to the LMX quality of relationships categorized as in-groups where full mutually inclusive interaction occurs and out-groups where there is the possibility of inequity of interaction or exchange, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Jawahar et al, 2019; Khair et al., 2024); as a result of the leaders formulation of who were consider to be of low or high trustees in the determinacy of beneficial or non-beneficial relationships. This formulation categorization can be perceived by others as either intentional inclusive or exclusive behavior. For example, while trust between the organization and their members have its beneficial gains for system improvements and goal attainment through collaborative efforts, (Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022), the choice to extend or accept a measure of

trust exposes either parties of the relationship to openings of vulnerability, agreements and manipulation, (Gustafsson et al., 2021; Mayer et al., 1995; Reynolds & Lander, 2024).

The fostering of inclusivity in the working environment is such an intricate paradox, that the extension of trust to be included from one party to another can be seen by others as only a representation of token inclusion rather than mutual inclusion, if it is perceived that inclusion of particularly individual(s) of historically characterized minority group, is to intentionally only reflect equality in the working environment for other gains instead of employees well-being for felt inclusiveness and belonging, (Adamson et al., 2021; Morin & Burrell, 2024). Thus, depending on the application on the fostering of trust, it can be a mechanism of influence for constructive or exploitive shared behavioral outcomes amongst employees, (Reynolds & Lander, 2024; Tauetsile, 2021), if the organization and its leaders actions doesn't reflect that they are invested in their employees welfare and experiences, (Morin & Burrell, 2024; Wilton et al., 2020). It is crucial that leadership of the organization authentically garner employees trust in the organizational systems and practices of EDI as such trust remains important in leader-member relationship, as it can have influences on both individual and organizational performance, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Haryanto et al., 2023; Wilton et al., 2020). Igniting positive attitudes and behaviors when employees perceived the incorporation of belongingness via the recognition and acceptances of their individual differences and fostering a working environment where all employees have equivalent opportunities and access to resources and backing to progressively navigate the fulfillment of their job roles, (Arif et al., 2023; Chen & Tang, 2018; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, et al., 2018). Reinforcing continuous active trust amongst employees from the assurance of felt inclusiveness where they can fully express their true selves, as conducive members within the working environment of the organization, (Rabl et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, does being included and experiencing felt inclusiveness implies that individuals' dissimilarities and individuality will be fully accepted and incorporated with equity in access to opportunities, and progression in the working environment that is offered to other members, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017)? As organization with a diverse workforce have been found to be less cohesive in creating fully engage employee, (Li et al., 2019, Mor Barak, 2011; 2011; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Sabharwal, 2014). Or will employees have to make behavioral and attitudes adjustments to fit in and receive the equity in access to opportunities, and progression in the working environment that is offered to other members? Since employees who are becoming or who are being accepted as a member of the in-group may be exposed to some type of conformism, (Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022), and employees who are perceive as the excluded or out group members may consciously or unconsciously indulge in deliberate behaviors that can impact the employee's own well-being, but doing so to be in good standing to shift from being excluded to possibly being included, (Howard et al, 2020; Reece et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2023). As being included at times can be challenging and conflicting for individuals, as they find themselves trying to maintain a balance of aligning their distinctiveness with the rules and work culture norms of operations on how its done in the working environment, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017; Shore & Chung, 2023). Which can be in the form of project work groups where employees are paired or choose to work with others base on skill set and other characteristics that are used to identify with a group or individuals. This can possibly ignite uncertainty about the belongingness among others, (Wilton et al., 2020), causing more harm than good, as they may be less likely to fully engage and perform the job to the fullness of their abilities, (Jerónimo et al., 2022); birthing injuries to existing relationships, derailment in trust maturity, and undermining the EDI efforts

towards inclusivity causing trust in the organization and its leaders to become fragmented. Shore & Chung (2023) in their research gave rise to the internal conflict experienced by employees especially individuals' of historically minority group, when they perceived exclusion and finding themselves masking part of who they are to project that they have accepted and easily adapted to the tenets and customs of the working environment, (Howard et al, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023); which ultimately impacts both their performance and the organization performance, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Haryanto et al., 2023; Wilton et al., 2020). As employees may perceive the working environment as a space where differences of voice and perspective to the establish tenets are not recognize, valued or welcome.

Such rising occurrence can possibly place the organization in a delicate position via its leadership to actively work on the restoration of the balance of trust by shifting the social perception to trust rebranding via practice adjustments where the process involves' working to infuse behavioral changes where there is, (a) recognition of the breach and the risen consequences as a result of the broken trust, (b) boosting of social interactive engagement through the reassurance that feedback is being address, (c) emphasis on structural reassessments to curtail future reoccurrences, (Gustafsson et al., 2021; Reynolds & Lander, 2024). All towards the incorporation of belongingness via the recognition and acceptances of individual differences and fostering an inclusive working environment where all employees have equivalent opportunities and access to resources and backing to progressively navigate the fulfillment of their job roles, (Arif et al., 2023; Chen & Tang, 2018; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, et al., 2018). Since the aim and direct intention of inclusion is to foster an environment where individuals experience felt belonging and inclusiveness to contribute and be their authentic selves without

having to suppress any part of their identity of similarities and differences within the shared environment, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017, Shore et al., 2018).

### **Employee Engagement Reflects the Impression of the Working Environment.**

Employee work engagement and employee engagement will be compatible as they both represents interactions between leaders and organizational members, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023; Siyal, 2023). Employee work engagement stands as the energy employees invest into to their work thereby reflecting their eagerness and commitment, (Siyal, 2023). Employee engagement aids in the growth and trustworthiness of the organization, as their efforts in performance of their respective contractual duties ensures the operations of the entity are functional, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023; Khair et al., 2024; Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022; Wagner & Koob, 2022). The working environment is filled with signs and information about the organization intentions and importance of its employees such as EDI commitments and policies, (Cole & Salimath, 2013; Mansoor et al., 2021), and the extent of which their inputs and concerns are integrated into the functional components of its operations, (Li et al., 2019; Mansoor et al., 2021; Wilton et al., 2020; Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022), and via its standards of operation such as practices and procedures, (Rabl et al., 2020). Employees gave significances to occurrences, practices and processes that they had encountered to justify employers' values and efforts in relation to the cultivation of an inclusive environment of diversity, (Mansoor et al., 2021). This was discovered via the social interactions between leader member exchanges which can influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. Employees are self-conscious to the happenings of the working environment within their organization, where they subsequently formulate assumptions about the concerns and tenets that are supported by their

employer (Bal et al., 2010; Mansoor et al., 2021). They tend to assess or indulge in the social information processing in their working environment to self-formulate the intentions of the organization concerning their employees, (Xintian & Peng, 2023) as this can influence the engagement of the employee. Employees received information from within their working environment via observation and verbal and non-verbal interactions, (Tang et al., 2022), they would engage in the dissection and interpretation of the information transmitted and received to formulate a story rooted from their perception of the environment to align their attitudes and behaviors, (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Bernstein, 2020). Employee's social network within their employment is prone to significantly influence their perceptions of workplace inclusion, as workplace inclusion is where employees feel connected with others and for sensing the belongingness or exclusion within their respective social networks that exist within the working environment, (Arif et al., 2023; Bernstein, 2020; Chen & Tang, 2018; Grosser et al., 2023; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, 2018). Employees tend to form perceptions of inclusion or exclusion within the working environment from their evaluation and perceived reception they experience within the social networks in the environments (Alexandra et al., 2021; Grosser et al., 2023; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). Social networks at work can or may be an allied for an interconnected sense of inclusiveness as it plays an intricate part in cultivating a working environment that stimulates interpersonal trust and collaboration, (Bernstein, 2020; Grosser et al., 2023), as employees assessed their social work networks for belongingness or exclusion by self identifying with characteristics and happenings within the working environment.

This social identification is intertwined in LMX principle of creating and strengthening working relationships via engagements from felt belonging or familiarities within groupings of

the working environment. The social identification and comparison process involves employees arriving at a social self-identity from consciously recognizing identifiable characteristics within their working environment and about a particular group or individuals that significantly influences their felt belongingness to the said group of individuals, (Marescaux et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Employees who are categorized as in-groups experience full mutual interaction and out-groups experience low or imbalance of interaction or exchanges, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Jawahar et al, 2019; Khair et al., 2024). Which can result in engagement deterioration from employees in the out-group to leaders and in-group employees, as they were found to less likely to want to engage if they perceive the organizational values and objectives as not being in alignment with their own expectations, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020; Jerónimo et al., 2022). Signaling that employee's level of engagement may be a reflection of attitudes and behavior aligning with the employees' interpretive reality of the working environment, (Jawahar et al, 2019; Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). That is, employees' fulfillment for the need to belong is influence by the value of the relationships between self and others of in-group and out-group within the working environment. Despite, the existing members dependency on leaders within the social network for information that aids employees in their fulfillment of the need to belong, for daily work tasks completion, for navigating the constant challenges and changes. It does not result in inclusivity surety written in stone that affiliation with social networks within the working environment will always result in the stimulation of feelings of belongingness and inclusiveness from information exchanges between employees and leaders, (Grosser et al., 2023). According to Mor-Barak & Cherin, (1998), the self-comparison actions of employees in relations to their alignment with the in-groups and out-groups within the working environment, is reflective of "flocking" by research Levine (1979). Employees are

constantly indulging in the assessment on their membership status to the respective groups, which may alter their perceptions based on the feedback they receive from the groups. Thus, employees often find themselves on the receiving or giving end of being accepted-rejected by or of others and simultaneously influencing personal perceptions of inclusion-exclusion, (Bernstein, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998).

Conversely, employees may become highly engaged when their needs for inclusiveness is not being fulfilled, causing employees to be more intentional and self-conscious about the social information exchanges between each other. As a matter of fact, prior studies proposes that the perception of low social interactions can occasionally influence employees to connect with others instead of being intimidated or disgruntle causing low engagement, (Tang et al., 2022). Motivating employees to work on relationship building and the awareness of whether the information exchanges are of great significance for felt inclusion and belonging. For example, to attract and retain employees for system improvements and goal attainment, organizations via its members participates in negotiations with employees towards a mutually beneficial employment agreement that incorporates certain conditions of exchanges for benefits, (Marescaux et al., 2021; Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022). This where employees engage in discussions for an employment contract that can possibly fulfil their psychological and physical needs while being employed or enhance their current employment context with the trust that both parties will uphold their commitments. But this practice can intentionally and unintentionally invoke both positive and negative responses from employees in alignment with both their self-preconceive perceptions of equity and felt belongingness, and the organizational EDI desires; particularly where employees who are categorize in in-groups are favored over others for advancement opportunities and supportive resources to pilot the self-actualization of their job roles, (Arif et

al., 2023; Chen & Tang, 2018; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, et al., 2018). Outsider employees or the out-groupers may choose to indulge in behaviors that are counterproductive and disruptive to the EDI efforts of the organization, as their social identity and self-comparison with employees of the in-group may not be a reflection of the organizational EDI efforts for an all-inclusive working environment, (Jawahar et al, 2019; Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). Thus, social identity and self comparison can be influenced by the context of the working environment, affecting employee behaviors, attitudes, and perception, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023; Marescaux et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023).

The various roles bestowed upon employees does not only offer certain rights and responsibilities respectively, but simultaneously offers an opportunity for them to authentically express themselves via inputs towards the fulfilment of their job responsibilities and ultimately the growth of the organization. But their authentic selves must experience and receive acknowledgement or believe that the working environment is supportive and accepting of their respective individual differences or uniquenesses, (Woods et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). As employees observations about the interactive exchanges returns from their designated roles can influence their level of engagement dispersal into the working environment, (Kataria et al., 2013). The engagement and dis engagement of employees at work are influenced from behavioral actions within the working environment such as lack of or limited support from management and poor work relationships with other employees or teammates, (Kataria et al., 2013; Sabharwal, 2014), and perceived inclusion, (Alexandra et al., 2021; Grosser et al., 2023). Employee engagement origin from Kahn, (1990) who notes that an engaged employee is one who is logical in reasoning, emotionally self aware, and hands on in their environment throughout the performance of their job, (Alshaabani et al., 2022; Decuyperre & Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner &

koob, 2022); making them privy to happenings in the working environment, (Kossyva., et al, 2023). As employees who are excited about their job and passionate about the performance of their work responsibilities, they tend to be continuously engage, (Alshaabani et al., 2022; Ana Nesic et al., 2020; Batmomolin et al., 2022). A reflection of employees' commitment and satisfaction to the values of the organization, (Haryanto et al., 2023; Wushe & Shenje, 2019), from the quality of engagement that impacts their perception of fairness from leadership support; as it relates to the quality of the establish relationships or the continuous rapport building of relationship, and the reciprocity of the exchanges, (Haryanto et al., 2023; Wushe & Shenje, 2019). Noting the two key ingredients of employee engagement from (Sak, 2006) which are organizational engagement represented by leaders and employees engagement via their allegiance to the organization, (Ly, 2024). Should these exchanges from these respective engagement be perceived fair and of valuable interest to the parties involve, it can further influence relationships of trust between leaders and members, that ultimately evolves into the growth of the organization. On the other hand, if there are variations in the reciprocity of fairness in relation to the quality of engagement and the exchanges contributions, employees' interest to engage can decline, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Thus, creating an atmospheric environment where employees' perceptions become distorted and possibly one-sided via the influence of thought-provoking uncertainty by questioning the authenticity of the relationship development within the working environment, (Seo et al., 2018). As leaders working closely with staff may convey inclusion through their engagement, for example, through the active incorporation of individual or group inputs in decisions that impacts the working environment, (Naseer et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011; Shore & Chung, 2023), or employees' can perceive a sense of not belonging or exclusion if the opportunities and rapport are not equally shared or promoted,

(Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023; Shore & Chung, 2023), and causing the erosion of trust within the working environment.

### **Engagement and Trust via Interpersonal Relationships are Efforts for Connections.**

Leaders have a substantial impact on employees' work behavior and attitudes in the achievement of organizational goals, as employees tend to gravitate towards trust building relationships with leaders who they perceived as being fair, well respected, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Diebig et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2023). Interpersonal trust stands as particularized trust, where trust is aimed intentionally to chosen member(s) of the organization such as a leader, an employee or group of teammates, (Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022). An indication that the quality of the trust and exchanges within the leader-member relationship is unique with each respective individuals, influenced by their respective perception on the dynamics of the relationship and the working environment, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Within the working environment behaviors that exemplifies trust within the leader-member relationship of exchanges, is one where there is a sense of dependency in exchange for interrelated work support. That is, leadership dependence is on the abilities and judgment of the employees and simultaneously divulging personal or professional information relevant to their employee's respective development and job performance, (Malik et al., 2023; Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022). Employees dependency on their leaders and employer that they will do right by them in exchange for the performance of their duties to the best of their abilities, while extending loyalty and commitment. Employees tend to be more driven, cooperative and productive when they are working for a leader who is upright, approachable, understanding and intentional about their concerns within the working environment, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Ly, 2024;

Naseer et al., 2023). Despite this notion, leaders tends to establishes and maintains strong relationships with chosen employees that is based on social exchanges and trust as resources allocation scope may or can be limited, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Diebig et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2018), and employees who are not extended such privileges may experience inconsistencies in receiving full support and felt inclusion by their leaders, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Since such disparity in the LMX can give rise to employees competing against each other, formation of subgroups, undermining diversity and performance cohesiveness; all of which can distort the perception on fairness execution within the working environment, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Hooper & Martin, 2008; Yu et al., 2018). As the actions of the leader can convey whether they are exhibiting relatable or non-relatable behaviors when there is a consistency or disconnected or inconsistency with transparency in decision making, equity in resource allocation and committed support to staff, (Malik et al, 2023). On the other, Tang et al., (2022), proposes that LMX disparity can possibly inspire employees to connect and improve their work relationships, if they dare to go outside the grandiloquence of disparity being permanently counter-productive. According to Tang et al., (2022), studies have produced outcomes that indicated productive exchanges amongst employees and even with leaders transpires relatively on a regular more than disparaging exchanges. As prior studies proposed that the perception of low social interactions can occasionally influence employees to connect with others by conformism, with the intentions of winning others over and be in good standing; instead of being alarmed or perceiving exclusion, (Howard et al, 2020; Reece et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022). On the other hand, employees making behavioral and attitude adjustments to fit in and to be liked or accepted by others, (Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022), may find themselves subject to internal conflict in trying to maintain a balance of aligning

their uniqueness with the reality of the working environment, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017; Shore & Chung, 2023). Historically employees categorized as minority group, were found to be masking part of who they are to mirror agreement to the tenets and customs of the working environment, (Howard et al, 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023). This also triggers deliberations on the realness about the type of influence diversity and inclusion impacts both employee performance and the organization performance, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Haryanto et al., 2023; Wilton et al., 2020).

How individuals or in this case employees' react, feels and expresses themselves to another can be drawn from the lived experiences from past and current events within the social environment of the workplace and other environments, (Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). Thus, employees responses to exclusion and inclusion activities and behaviors in their work environment via their expressions about their felt experiences may be an effort for connection and creating relationships with others via a sense of shared understanding, (Bernstein, 2020; Ferdman, 2014; Jennings et al., 2024; Li et al., 2019; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Reece et al., 2021; Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021; Shore et al., 2011). That is, employees seek out confirmation and validation in the social setting, relationship or group, that their inputs are welcome and respected by others, especially leaders. As these relationships are recognized as being derived on social exchanges rather than solely economical exchanges, since these social exchanges are shared exchanges on the bases of a measure of trust and reciprocity, (Malik et al., 2023; Islam, et al., 2023). The value of social exchanges in relationship within the working environment is dependent on the behaviors of the parties involved in the relationship, (Ahmad et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a constant self-vigil into the attitudes, behaviors, and setting of the leader member relationship, as these efforts of sharing or exchanging, observing and interpreting

of their social setting for relational indications is geared towards making sense of belonging, inclusiveness, and exclusiveness, (Bernstein, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). This cognizant system for processing information enables the individual to make sense of what they are experiencing and to self-formulate what they believe is occurring within the working environment. Employees intentionally work on becoming self-aware and figuring out what role they play as members of their working environment, (Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). Thus, the motivation behind employees expressing themselves or engaging can be impacted by the negative and positive reactions of leaders and peers within the working environment. As leaders particularly in their capacity to provide supportive resources which at times may be the exercising of their interpersonal skills of listening; tends to react either (a) negatively where responses can be interpreted or perceived as dismissive or unwelcoming and lacking empathy, or (b) positively where responses can be interpreted or perceived as understanding, welcoming, and empathetic, (Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). Both reaction responses influence employee's perception of inclusion and belonging, as the responses can be an informational nod to employees in their self-assessment and formation of whether they are recognized and valued within the working environment. However, the ability to recognize or become a receptor of such internal conflict from the deciphering of perceived information from the social working environment being experienced by employees; is an opportunity to indulge in sense making to understand and incorporate differences within the working environment. As individuals tends to have a preconceived notion about their worth and expectation on the treatment that ought to be extended to them, (Adamson et al., 2021; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Ferdman, 2017; Wagner & Koob, 2022). Thus, employees are constantly hunting for signals as information for assurance and reassurance to fill the need of belonging through inclusionary relations within the working

environment, (Bernstein, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, (2021) highlighted that employees seek the fulfillment of social inclusion where they experience shared relations with their peers and leadership via inclusive practices and behaviors in their working environment.

### **The effectiveness of Inclusivity Hinges on the Collective Support from the Organization and its Leadership.**

While the enactment of the Civil Rights Act 1964 followed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act 1972 have aided employers in diversifying their workforce via the enforcement of structural and functional transformations that prohibits them from employment discrimination. Employers have found it challenging in creating inclusive working environments for its diverse workforce, (Bernstein et al, 2020; Mor Barak, 2011; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nishii et al., 2018; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore, et al., 2018), where all employees can experience felt belonging and inclusiveness, (Woods et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020), via equitable access to resources and progression, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017). As noted, prior inclusion may be perceived differently depending on the ideologies of the individual and the context of their past and current environment, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017), as both employees and leaders have their own preconceived formulation on diversity and inclusion, (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner & Koob, 2022). However, a commonly shared belief among employees exist, that is, they mutually envision and yearn for felt belonging and inclusion in their working environment (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Li et al., 2019; Wagner & Koob, 2022; Shore et al., 2011). From an employee perspective, encountering or experiencing a working environment that satisfies this psychological need of belonging and felt inclusion, can be an indication that

employer and its members of leadership recognizes and are dedicated to the concerns of their diverse workforce and are actively working towards sustaining the diverse workforce via its EDI management, (Li et al., 2019; Mansoor et al., 2021; Shore et al., 2011). For it is the members of the organization particularly leadership that construct operational systems and the eco-infrastructure (Mor Barak, 2011; Mor Barak & Cherin 1998), and in doing so, weave the fabrics of the main culture of functionality and influencing subcultures of functionality. The effective integration and fostering of inclusion in the working environment are contingent on the voluntarily and active united efforts from all members of the organization, (Buengeler et al., 2018; Dawson et al, 2024; Mor Barak, 2000; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Scarborough et al., 2019; Shore et al, 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023). That is, it involved the alignment of interests from both the organization and its various members who are leaders and employees to a cohesive direction through collaborative efforts that create opportunities for inclusive decision making and the collective efforts in the achievement of the organizational goals, (Confetto et al., 2023; Dhanani et al., 2024; Fujimoto et al., 2023; Kossyva et al., 2023; Liu et al, 2022; Randel et al., 2018) and simultaneously aids the organization in producing equitable outcomes and valuable actions, (Bernstein, 2020; Ferdman, 2014; Mor Barak, 2000; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). If employees do not perceive efforts from the organization and its leadership as empathetic and reflecting concerns about their own employee's well-being and experiences, (Morin & Burrell, 2024; Wilton et al., 2020), it can potentially influence the misalignment behavioral outcomes from employees, (Reynolds & Lander, 2024; Tauetsile, 2021). As employers via their leadership must engage in continuous efforts in the fostering of an inclusive working environment and the management of EDI efforts that safeguards opportunities of progression for a diverse workforce; whether an individual is categorize as being a minority or majority, (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998;

Shore, et al., 2018). Such inclusive efforts involves a make it happen attitude support from the top leadership echelon to facilitate employee accessibility to engage and participate in decisions and processes that impacts the organization, (Dhanani et al., 2024; Fujimoto et al., 2023; Liu et al, 2022; Randel et al., 2018), and the promotion of equitable employee-management engagement relations, (Liu et al, 2022; Naseer et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011; Shore & Chung, 2023). These efforts can possibly accessorize and reinforce the recruitment and hiring process especially for individuals who are categorized as the historical minority group, or who are looking for the fulfilment of their psychological need for inclusion via equivalent opportunities to access resources for development and progression within the working environment, (Arif et al., 2023; Chen & Tang, 2018; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Rabl et al., 2020; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore, et al., 2018), positively enhancing both employee and organization performance, (Arif et al., 2023; Cho & Barak, 2008; Tauetsile, 2021). On the other hand, such efforts can provoke contradictory perceptions of equality or inequality amongst employees categorize as a part of the historical majority group, where they may or can perceive such efforts as being counterintuitive to the recruitment , hiring process and retention process if the focus is to intentionally target individuals who are categorized as the historical minority group instead of diverse voices regardless of the historical characteristics normally associated with the discrimination via such distinctiveness as age, ethnicity, race etc. Injuring employers EDI efforts towards staff development, recruitment, engagement, and retainment of employees, and ultimately the overall performance of the organization, (Sweeting, 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al, 2023). Partial or impartial support from management can ripple out to the creation of under develop working relationships amongst

employees, leader-member, or weakening employer-employee relationship, (Kataria et al., 2013), influencing perceive inclusion-exclusion, (Alexandra et al., 2021; Grosser et al., 2023).

Since employers branding strategic focus is promoting a visible perception of what makes them distinctive and suitable as an employer to current and potential employees as a method of attracting and retaining the desirable workforce that is both skilled and diverse, (Confetto et al., 2023; Biswas & Suar, 2016). Employers had to be intentional in their communication and engagement tactic to relay messages about their working culture and environment with the aim that it is equivalent with the current and potential employees' psychological needs and opportunities, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). As leaders may convey inclusion through their engagement, for example, through the active incorporation of individual or group inputs in decisions that impacts the working environment, (Naseer et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011; Shore & Chung, 2023). Their role and authority within the working environment enhanced their abilities to sway perceptions of inclusive-exclusive via alignment of their active partial or impartial efforts, such as, cultivating quality-exchange relationship with and amongst employees, and strategies of the organization, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2014, p.4; Liu et al, 2022; Malik et al., 2023; Seo et al., 2018, Shore & Chung 2023; Woods et al, 2024). Which can further impact leaders' interactive exchanges, causing their attitudes and behavior to be either in parallel or unparallel with the organizational EDI aims, (Shore & Chung, 2023). Inclusion is the intentional aim of incorporating equitable policies and practices into the diverse ongoing processes and perceptions that intertwine with organizational internal infrastructure such as systems, structure, culture and standard of operations, (Adamson et al., 2021; Arif et al., 2023; Ferdman, 2014). Influencing employee perception of belonging to the organization where they feel recognized and respected, (Mansoor et al., 2021; Naseer et al.,

2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023), via the inner workings of the working environment such as being able to contribute to and participate in processes and decisions making towards operational infrastructures of the organization, (Liu et al, 2022). In doing so, opened accessible opportunities to diverse employees to gain hands on experience in their environment, (Alshaabani et al., 2022; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner & koob, 2022); by making them privy to happenings in the working environment, and enhancing their value and leveraging their abilities towards the achievement of the organizational goals, (Confetto et al., 2023; Kossyva et al., 2023; Li et al., 2019; Mansoor et al., 2021; Sabharwal, 2014; Wilton et al., 2020; Zolfaghari & Madjdi, 2022). Motivating employees to actively engage and promote positive work attitudes and behaviors that improves work ethics and trust, that is reflective of culpability and adherence that are in parallel to employer EDI values and tenets, (Leslie, 2019). Employers who are intentional about its productivity, tends to actively and willingly work towards the creation of structures and systems that incorporates and leverages the differences of voices to add value and gain a competitive edge in their respective industry, instead of being mandated via affirmative action or merely to check a box, (Adamson et al., 2021; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore et al., 2018).

### **Summary**

The SET emphasizes that small exchanges build trust and safety over time, leading to stronger relationships. Reciprocity is key, with both parties expecting equivalent exchanges. As relationships progress, parties evaluate the benefits and costs of their interactions, influencing the nature of future exchanges. The theory originated from Homans in 1958 and was expanded in the 1960s to include the idea that social behavior is instrumental. It highlights that constructive or unconstructive efforts during exchanges can lead to positive or negative relationships, affecting

workplace inclusion and culture. Leaders played a central part in fostering an inclusive culture, impacting employees' professional and personal behavior, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Jerónimo et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2022). The LMX theory, derived from SET, prominence is on the quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates, (Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). High-quality LMX relationships involved reciprocated support and motivation, while low-quality ones are more formal and transactional. Trust and engagement are essential for effective exchanges. High-quality LMX relationships hints to improved work efforts and confidence in the employer, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Haryanto et al., 2023; Jawahar et al, 2019; Khair et al., 2024). However, disparities in these rapports can cause perceptions of discrimination and affect employee engagement and trust.

The concept of intentional inclusion can sometimes inadvertently lead to exclusion. While inclusivity is crucial for effective EDI practices, achieving consistent and genuine diversity practices remains challenging, (Bernstein et al, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nishii et al., 2018). Studies show that efforts to expand diversity can result in either authentic inclusion or merely signaling inclusion without real impact, (Arif et al., 2023; Adamson et al., 2021; Bernstein et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2024; Dover et al., 2020; ; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Nishii, 2018; Scarborough et al., 2019; Wilton et al., 2020). Inclusion involved integrating employees lived experiences into organizational processes and culture, requiring active participation from all employees, (Bernstein et al., 2020; Dawson et al, 2024; Shore et al, 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023). It goes beyond traditional diversity attributes like age, ethnicity, and nationality, focusing on balancing uniqueness and minimizing exclusionary behaviors, (Bernstein et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2024; Howard et al., 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Scarborough et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023; Yadav &

Lenka, 2020). Exclusion can be both intentional and unintentional, often used to maintain social control within groups or teams, (Adamson et al., 2021; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Shore & Chung, 2023; Wang & Li, 2018). This can destabilize diversity efforts and lead to perceptions of inequity, affecting employees' sense of belonging and authenticity, (Dawson et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2018; Howard et al., 2020; Shore & Chung, 2023). This can harm relationships, reduce productivity, and undermine efforts to create an inclusive environment through established EDI practices. Individuals in workplace relationships may unconsciously or consciously engage in discriminatory behaviors by preferring to collaborate with familiar colleagues. While EDI initiatives can enhance an organization's appeal, they may also unintentionally exclude some employees. Such conflicting perceptions can distort views on fairness and raise concerns about the authenticity of EDI policies, (Jordan et al., 2019). Employees might see these initiatives as mere formalities rather than genuine efforts to foster diversity. Employees' opinions of inclusiveness swayed their performance and obligation to the organization, (Arif et al., 2023; Cho & Barak, 2008; Tauetsile, 2021). The perception of inclusiveness is influenced by the quality of LMX relationships, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al., 2018; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Leaders can positively impact their followers through consistent, authentic behavior and commitment to EDI goals. Effective communication and actions by leaders are crucial in promoting genuine employee engagement and reflecting the organization's true EDI intentions.

Trust in organizational relationships is built when parties consciously decide to engage in mutual exchanges, fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging. Trust requires continuous maintenance through observation, active input, and adaptation to changing circumstances. Employees' trust in their organization is contingent on transparency, uprightness, goal achievement, and addressing concerns like fairness in EDI management, (Bal et al., 2010; Li et

al., 2019; Mansoor et al., 2021; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Wilton et al., 2020). Trust is relational and influenced by conditions, interactions, and organizational practices. Mayer et al. (1995) identified three key characteristics for establishing trust: ability, goodwill, and reliability. Trust quality aligns with the SET which emphasizes reciprocity of exchanges and safety in relationships. Trust can be generalized or particularized. Generalized trust is based on past and current experiences, while particularized trust is specific to individual relationships. Leaders played a crucial role in fostering trust through consistent, authentic behavior and positive interactions. Trust can be a motivational tool, influencing employees' perceptions and performance, but if leaders and organizations do not genuinely invest in employees' well-being, it can lead to negative outcomes. High-quality LMX relationships involved mutual trust and inclusive interactions, while low-quality relationships may lead to perceptions of inequity and exclusion. Fostering inclusivity in the workplace is complex and can sometimes lead to perceptions of token inclusion rather than genuine inclusion. Leaders must authentically build trust through transparent and fair EDI practices. This trust influences both individual and organizational performance, fostering positive attitudes and behaviors when employees feel recognized and accepted for their differences. However, achieving true inclusivity means ensuring that all employees have equal opportunities and resources minus having to imitate or masquerade their individualities, (Adamson et al., 2021; Arif et al., 2023; Chen & Tang, 2018; Ferdman, 2017; Rabl et al., 2020; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, et al., 2018). Employees may struggle with balancing their uniqueness with workplace norms, leading to feelings of exclusion and impacting their engagement and performance. Organizations must work to restore trust by addressing breaches, enhancing social interactions, and reassessing structures to prevent future issues.

Employee work engagement and employee engagement are interconnected, reflecting interactions between leaders and organizational members, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023; Siyal, 2023). Work engagement is the energy and commitment employees invest in their work, while overall engagement supports organizational growth and trustworthiness. Employees interpreted organizational intentions and EDI commitments through social interactions and observations. These perceptions influenced their attitudes and behaviors. Social networks at work significantly impacts employees' sense of inclusion or exclusion, affecting their engagement and performance, (Alexandra et al., 2021; Arif et al., 2023; Bernstein, 2020; Chen & Tang, 2018; Grosser et al., 2023; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Rabl et al., 2020; Shore, 2018). The LMX principle highlighted that employees categorized as in-groups experienced full mutual interaction, while out-groups experienced less interaction, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Jawahar et al., 2019; Khair et al., 2024). This can lead to engagement deterioration if employees feel the organization's values do not align with their expectations, (Cao & Galinsky, 2020; Jerónimo et al., 2022). Employees continuously assessed their membership status within social networks, influencing their perceptions of inclusion or exclusion, (Bernstein, 2020; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998). Effective engagement requires fostering a consciousness of belonging and inclusiveness via positive collective interactions and alignment with organizational values, (Haryanto et al., 2023; Wushe & Shenje, 2019). Employees may become highly engaged when their need for inclusiveness is unmet, prompting them to be more intentional about social interactions via the building of relationships and seeking meaningful exchanges for inclusion and belonging, (Howard et al, 2020; Reece et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022). Employees' social identity and self-comparison within the work environment may influence their behaviors and attitudes. Authentic self-expression and acknowledgment of individual differences are

crucial for engagement. Lack of support and poor relationships can lead to disengagement, (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Fair and valuable exchanges between leaders and employees build trust and drive organizational growth. On the other hand, perceived unfairness can distort perceptions and erode trust, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023; Seo et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023).

Leaders significantly influence employees' work behavior and attitudes, impacting organizational goals. Employees tend to trust and build relationships with fair and respected leaders, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Diebig et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2023). Trust within leader-member relationships is unique to each individual and is based on mutual dependency and support, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Employees are more driven and productive when they work for leaders who are approachable and understanding, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Ly, 2024; Naseer et al., 2023). However, leaders often form stronger relationships with certain employees, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Diebig et al., 2024; Malik et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2018), leading to disparities in support and inclusion, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). This can create competition amongst employees, subgroups, and perceptions of unfairness within the working environment. Despite these challenges, low social interactions can sometimes motivate employees to improve relationships, (Howard et al, 2020; Reece et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022). Employees may adjust their behavior to fit in, but this can lead to internal conflict, especially for minority groups who may feel the need to mask their true selves, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017; Shore & Chung, 2023). Employees seek validation and confirmation in their social settings, and their engagement is influenced by leaders' reactions. Understanding and tackling these dynamics is essential for cultivating an inclusive work atmosphere, as positive responses from leaders fostered a sense of

belonging, (Naseer et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011; Shore & Chung, 2023), while negative responses can ignite perceptions of exclusion, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023; Shore & Chung, 2023).

Inclusion is perceived differently by individuals based on their experiences, but employees generally desire belonging and inclusion, (Adamson et al., 2021; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Ferdman, 2017; Li et al., 2019; Wagner & Koob, 2022; Shore et al., 2011). Effective inclusion required active efforts from all organizational members, particularly leaders, to align interests and foster collaborative decision-making. Leaders must demonstrate empathy and commitment to employees' well-being to avoid misalignment and negative behaviors, (Morin & Burrell, 2024; Reynolds & Lander, 2024; Tauetsile, 2021; Wilton et al., 2020). Inclusive efforts ought to ensure unbiased allowance to resources and prospects for all employees, irrespective of their background, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2017; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Shore, et al., 2018). This approach may provide diverse employees with hands-on experience, enhancing their value and abilities towards achieving organizational goals. However, targeting historically minority groups can sometimes lead to perceptions of inequality among majority groups, potentially harming EDI efforts. Employers who prioritized productivity actively created inclusive structures and systems, leveraging diverse voices for added value and competitive advantage, rather than merely complying with affirmative action mandates, (Adamson et al., 2021; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore et al., 2018).

Since the 1960's social behavior has been influential in employees' commitment to their employer, where constructive and unconstructive efforts during interactive exchanges yields

either high- or low-quality relationships, (Ahmad et al., 2023; Tauetsile, 2021). Consequently, with the constant conflict between organization reality and employee perception on EDI in the working environment, this study aims to develop a theoretical understanding into the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees via their interactive exchanges; and the influence trust and engagement have on their interactive exchanges, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Jeronimo., et al, 2022; Morin & Burrell, 2024; Rezai et al., 2023). Hence, through theme generation the study posited the following; (a) practitioners and employers efforts to intentionally balance and manage the diversity of the employees into a cohesive functioning workforce, can invertedly reflect exclusion; (b) trust empowerment is relational to the interactive exchanges between employees within the working environment, as trust is a system of shared expectations and emotional need for connecting via relationship; (c) the quality of employee engagement is a reflection of employees impression of the working environment; (d) engagement and trust via interpersonal relationships are efforts for connection, as it can be intentionally designated for a particular individual; and (e) the effectiveness of inclusivity hinges on the collective support from the organization and its leadership, as they are the creators of the overarching operational systems, the eco infrastructure, and the main culture of functionality that subcultures of functionality are an extension of. Therefore, EDI effectiveness within the working environment is contingent on the voluntarily efforts and committed support from all especially the top management.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The problem addressed, was the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. As employees continue to believe inclusivity is not equally experienced in their work setting, research expansion into diversity and inclusion continues via the strategic focus on relationships and practices within the live setting of the employee working environment where the daily activities and events are unfolding, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023).

This chapter features the procedural blueprint for guiding this study, outlining the research design, identification of the study population, instrumentation, study procedures, data collection, and data analysis. The study employed a qualitative case study approach to advance broader insights into what was occurring within the environment from an observant and the affected individual respective perspective, opening opportunities to examine the activities and exchanges arising out of the daily engagement between the intended population of leaders and non-leader employees. The single case study approach incorporated in-depth interview with structured open-end questions and observation via the researcher as the data collection instrument, (Yin, 2017). The ethical guard rails was incorporated into the study to ensure the integrity of the collection and storage of data was uphold in ensuring confidentiality of the participants and validity of the study.

## Research Methodology and Design

This study utilized case study methodology and in-depth interview with structured open-ended questions for the data collection instrument to gather thick rich and insightful data, to develop a coding scheme via the thematic analysis that connected data and concept. The case study approach was suitable for the research environment; as the study recognized in spite of the complexities of sub-departmental components location of multiple sites in New York and New Jersey, reflecting differences in job functions, cultures, and subcultures; the targeted population comprised of individuals that represented employees and mid-level leaders who were connected via their shared experiences that impacted them personally and professionally, (Epitropaki et al., 2021; Haryanto et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). This organic environment offered opportunities to advance insights into live behaviors and attitudes from the work engagement and trust enthroned in the dynamics of the leader-member relationship as they were unfolding in this environment that experiences many shifting demands in achieving effective delivery of patient care. According to Yin (2017) a case study design approach should be considered when the following characteristics are current: (a) answering how, what and why questions; (b) there are significant recent past and present-day happenings or behaviors within the environment; (c) that are not easily controlled for the researcher to distinguish the practice or circumstance.

The case study scrutinized the live experiences of participants as an ongoing process within the environment, utilizing various bases of substantiation, to observe and rationalize what was happening, (Bloomberg, 2018; Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022; Yin, 2017). This allowed the study to focus on addressing the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees within the rich organic environment of daily happenings;

and fulfilled the purpose of better understanding what contributed to these misalignments, (Bloomberg, 2018). The case study design comprised of the assessment and description of a common occurrence that was pertinent to an event via daily involvements within a departmental component with multiple location of a single organization, (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019). That is, there was only a singular focus within the chosen organization where the researcher was readily equipped with the sensitivity awareness of the daily practices and happenings in the environment, (Faulkner & Faulkner, 2019). This offered the researcher the opportunity of being interactively engaged via the utilization of an interactive tool and as an observer of the sample population to compiled effective narrated account from live observations about their exchanges, significances, practices via the similarities and differences of opinions and behaviors, (Adler, 2022; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020). Concluding with the construction of a thorough narrative of the environment and its members, complemented with a scrutiny of the data for themes and patterns via the thematic analysis, (Bloomberg, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Yin, 2017). The ethnographic approach was previously employed in studies to access insights into groups cultural and social dynamics as the occurrences was being unfolded, and to leverage the lived experiences of individuals to explore the intricacies of EDI, (Duesbery & Twyman, 2020; Samar & Babineau, 2023). Unfortunately, due to the extensive timeframe commitments necessary to capture sufficient data for a vigorous analysis in fulfillment of the research purpose, and the personal monetary cost that would be incur by the researcher, the ethnographic approach was less suitable for this research to access insights into the targeted population and their social dynamics, , (Duesbery & Twyman, 2020).

## **Population and Sample**

The study targeted population was comprised of health workers diverse in professional specialization, ethnicity, culture, and experiences within a departmental component of a healthcare organization. The population was opportunely available as potential access to research setting for sample population, and working relationships with key stakeholders who were crucial to granting study approval; all of which were key to data collection and meeting the aims of the study in addressing the unalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees via in-depth understanding into what contributes to these misalignment, via the dynamics of engagement and trust within the working relationships of mid-level leaders and non-leader employees. These participants were recruited via the approval from the organization and the collaboration of the department human resource personnel, the Associate Operation Director, and the Senior Director of Hospital Administration, who oversees that department. These individuals played a vital role in identifying the sampling frame verses what was actual as it relates to which sub-departmental components had individuals with designated title as mid-level manager or supervisor; along with non-leader employees. Afterwhich, recruitment communication was sent with contents about the study, instrumentation and data collection, and inform consent form for review to potential participants via their work email. This gave the potential participants opportunity to process the information to arrive at the decision to participate or decline. The participants were subjected to the following inclusion criteria; (a) no gender restrictions will be imposed, (b) functions in one of sub-departmental components of the study environment, (c) mid-level leader or non-leader, (d) clinical or non-clinical, (e) minimum of two years employment with the organization, and (f) must be 18years and older. The purposive sampling method was employed to purposely obtain participants who

possessed the characteristics of the study criterion from the intended population, where synergistic or non-synergistic exchanges took place amongst employees on a daily basis to navigate their working environment; which were relevant to the research inquiries, (Ames et al., 2019; Monga, 2016). There are no clear tenet on the sample size for narrative inquiry research, reasonings being that sampling must be desist when there is a redundancy in information or commonly known as the point of data saturation, (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Conversely, Hennink & Kaiser, (2022). have suggested that 9 to 17 interviews allowed datasets to reach saturation with 11-12 interviews being the mean, Thus, this study followed suit and interview 9-12 participants or until saturation was achieved.

### **Instrumentation**

For this case study, the data collection encompassed multiple data sources via verbally conducting person-to-person virtual interview sessions via Zoom or Teams with participants from both New York and New Jersey sites with structured open-end questions and via visual capacity, with field notes on observation during these interviews, (Bloomberg, 2018; Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022; Yin, 2017). Allowing broader flexibilities to access and investigate the disconnect of current organizational EDI's desired expectations and live experiences of leadership and employees; from documenting live narratives to highlight similarities and dissimilarities responses from the group of individuals under the study in relation to engagement and trust influences on inclusivity in the working environment via the day-to-day happenings. Armed with such data, the researcher was able to honestly present added evidence of what ways participants viewpoints were interpreted and converted into actions. As these bases of substantiation were united to form consistent fixed conclusions in relation to the research problem, purpose and questions, the data gathered, the inferences, and the replication soundness,

(Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022). The table in appendix A, illustrates the study's problem, purpose, research questions, and interview questions. The interview questions were subjected to the scrutiny of EDI professionals who voluntarily offered feedback to safeguard the interview questions from bias and echo, ensuring they are in unison with the purpose and research questions. That is, the questions were rooted in prior diversity research findings and constructed towards the illumination of engagement and trust influences on inclusivity in the working environment, (see Appendix A).

### **Study Procedures**

Upon receiving study approval from National University Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruitment was initiated followed by data collection. The recruitment and data collection progression began with an email communication to prospective participants via their work email. The recruitment email contents included a general introduction of the researcher, the nature and purpose of the study, identified deadline to indicate voluntary interest to participate, contact details, and the attached consent document that was constructed within the IRB parameters for review by participants, (see Appendix B & C). Once participants acknowledged interest, they were assessed to ensure they met all the study criteria listed in both the recruitment email and consent form, as selection of participants was key to capturing the right data for the research questions. Despite the allotted timeframe for the data collection was 45-60 minutes, the data collection was done via a 20-30 minutes with the exception of two participants, virtual interview sessions with non-identifiable open end questions for capturing the participants narratives about their experiences within the working environment, (see Appendix A). Once participants were cleared of the study criteria via a pre-screening, (see Appendix D), interview sessions were scheduled at an appointed date and time that was mutually convenient for both researcher and

participant to conduct interviews. The interviews were facilitate via teams or zoom virtual platforms. Depending on the timings and locations of both researcher and participant, conference rooms or chosen comfortable space were utilized to ensure privacy; affording all voluntary participants an opportunity to participate.

In this study, informed consent was a continuing activity from recruitment and right through the end. Thus, on the day of each scheduled interviews, before each interviews began, extra time were incorporated to ensure participants were comfortable and were able to performed activities to ascertain inform consent such as; (a) confirm participants received the consent form via email, (b) reviewed the consent materials with each participant, (c) reiterated to participants that they had the autonomy to retract from the study at any time, and that they did not had to answer all questions if they did not wanted to, (d) informed participants that another session may be requested to refine any details, (e) allowed participants to ask questions to ease any concerns or uncomfortableness about the study, and (f) asked the participants if they gave permission to participate in the study and being recorded. All observations on participants such as emotional responses, reactions, bodily language during interview sessions were documented. Afterwhich, all observation notes and interview responses were transcribed verbatim into a word document. Then each participants received a transcription of the interview for their revision and agreement via their work email. The data analysis involved the identification of similarities and differences, themes and patterns (Adler, 2022; Bloomberg, 2018; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Yin, 2017).

### **Data Analysis**

The case study approach was blended with the thematic analysis that involved searching for patterns or developing themes from raw data of lived experiences via inductive

and deductive logic to understand these experiences, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Following the collection of data via interviews and observation of the participants, the themes and patterns progression involved itemizing, categorizing, reducing, and elimination via continuous revision of the data to eventually isolate interpretive and illustrative elements of information via the help of NVivo software application for qualitative research, (Naeem et al., 2024). As it facilitated a speedier approach to isolate and code the data to cohesively provide a simplified and a logical format to draw conclusions. Where narratives from each participant transmitted elements relative to the recognized theme units and isolated to likenesses and differentiations and be house in the appropriate themes, (Adler, 2022; Bloomberg, 2018; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Yin, 2017). Paving the path in developing an electronic report that illustrates an efficient approach to themes conclusions to suggest the alignment of participants narratives, (Belotto, 2018; Billups, 2021). Thus, the member checking process involved the re-interviewing with selected participants to cross check any inconsistencies, confirmations, or transparency about certain accounts via the revision of the interview transcript, (Motulsky, 2021). This was a necessary notification to the participants at the commencement of data gathering with the resolution of substantiating that the disclose data translated, is undeniably their expressed words and significances, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021). The observation data was also be paired with the data from the interview to reinforce the interview data findings. As ascertaining reliability supported and corroborated the views and words being illuminated is undeniably the participants and not the personal biasness of the researcher being present in the narrative analysis. The objective of the analysis process involved achieving data saturation to affirm that the data analysis has completed all exploration of themes and patterns identification from the responses on the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired

expectations and those of leadership and employees from the participants. To the point where new information to generate additional themes and patterns is no longer possible with the continuation of further interviews and observations, (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2024). Thus, all communication and interaction with the research participants in relation to the study were desisted immediately.

### **Assumptions**

The study's assumed, that being physically present in the environment allows the researcher to self experience the exchanges between viewpoints, reactions, social settings; unearthing data from different perceptual capacity and knowledge from employees experiences from EDI unalignment within the working environment. Hence, the study assumed that the participants was honest in the interview sessions in their expression about their experiences on EDIs in the working environment. The study also assumed that two years employment within the study environment exposed participants to gain significant experience into the occurrences of the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees.

### **Limitations**

This study cannot be generalized as its being conducted within a particular setting with a small sample from a chosen population of healthcare professionals. There was the potential for the researcher and participants personal biases to blur the results outcome. Despite the allotted timeframe for the data collection was 45-60 minutes, the data collection was done via 20-30 minutes with the exception of two participants; the data collected were rich in details that it was tricky to interpret. Despite these limitations, the following strategies were employed to alleviate these limitations; (a) my employment title and responsibilities allowed a working rapport with

staff through the department and beyond the different sites, which served as an ice breaker to create a more casual interaction; (b) active management of personal biasness via self-reflection and training were enforced to minimize personal influences, via regular debriefing with study mentor; (c) consciousness to the cultural sensitivity within the study environment and with the participants; and (d) conducted re-interviews with selected participants to cross check any inconsistencies, confirmations, or transparency about certain accounts.

### **Delimitations**

The SET emphasized that small exchanges build trust and safety over time, leading to stronger relationships. The LMX theory, derived from SET, prominence is on the quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates, (Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). High-quality LMX relationships involve reciprocated support and motivation, while low-quality ones are more formal and transactional. High-quality LMX relationships hints to improved work efforts and confidence in the employer, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Haryanto et al., 2023; Jawahar et al, 2019; Khair et al., 2024). Trust and engagement are essential for effective exchanges. However, disparities in these rapports can cause perceptions of discrimination and affect employee engagement and trust. As the advocacy for inclusion is through constant interactive exchanges in the workplace that are fashioned by employees' daily practices and experiences, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023).

This organization was chosen as its one of the leading cancer specialize institutuion with varying services served by a diverse workforce. However, it was highly unlikely and merely impossible to gain access to the organization 31000 workforce to conduct a study into employees daily interactive exchanges within the limited timeframe with the researcher being the instrument for data collection, and not to mention very costly for the researcher whose education and study

is self-funded. The intention of this study was not to generalize its findings to a larger population, instead provide expanded knowledge in addressing these misalignments between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees, which can lead to a more cohesive and effective working environment; and ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance. Thus, the study target population was comprised of an estimated 1300 employees within a departmental component of a healthcare organization. The population was opportunely available due to potential access to the department as the research setting and the sample population, and existing working relationships with key stakeholders who were crucial to granting study approval.

### **Ethical Assurances**

This study was conducted under the strictest and ethical guidelines imposed by the institution IRB approval process. An official verbal overview of myself and explanation on the purpose of the study took precedents in communication with all participants. It encompassed a verbal explanation on morally obligation of safeguarding confidentiality via the reasoning for the necessity for securing volunteer approval, and simultaneously conveying the autonomy to retract from the study without impact to oneself to the participants. Participants responses to the recruitment notification were respected. Ensuring that all participants met the criteria of the study, as selection had to be in unison with the research questions to ethically captured data without compromising the study. All participation and recordings consent were inquired and responses were respected. They were also informed and shown that no personal identifiers would be revealed as a result of answering any of the questions and it was not a requirement for the study. All collected data will be kept in a cabinet at my dwelling and available by myself and research chairman during discussion. This study acknowledges the dual roles the researcher

played as the instrument and observer for data collection may cause concerns and challenges about the capabilities to hold an objective outlook. As the presence of any or all preconceived opinions or judgements can adversely impact data collections. Despite these looming challenges, the data collection process and analysis approach enabled an unbiased investigation illuminating the narrative essence behind the behaviors and social exchanges between mid-level managers and employees within their setting.

### **Summary**

The study aimed to understand the causes the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare setting in the New York and New Jersey Metro area. It used a qualitative case study approach to explore these issues, detailing the research methodology, population and sample, data collection instruments, the potential limitations, and the ethical considerations to be addressed to ensure confidentiality and validity. The case study approach explored the cultural and social dynamics within a workplace. This method was chosen because it allowed the timeframe for comprehensive understandings into the lived experiences of employees and mid-level leaders, focusing on their shared experiences and the dynamics of their relationships. This approach involved the researcher engaging with and observing daily activities to understand behaviors and attitudes related to work engagement and trust. A plight that was unsuitable for the ethnographic study approach because of the extensive time commitments it requires to capture adequate data on the complexities and nuances needed to understand the misalignment between organizational EDI expectations and those of leadership and employees. The study targeted approximately 1300 employees in a healthcare organization's department. The population was accessible due to current relationships with key stakeholders, which were crucial for access and data collection.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with a sample size of 9-12 or until data saturation for narrative inquiry research.

Inclusion criteria included no gender restrictions, must work in one of the sub-departmental components, mid-level leaders or non-leaders, clinical or non-clinical roles, at least two years of employment, and must be 18 years or older. Recruitment involved approval from institutional IRB, the organization for the study, and collaboration with HR, the Associate Operation Director, and the Senior Director of Hospital Administration, who helped identify potential participants. Communication about the study and consent forms were sent via work email, allowing participants to decide whether to participate. The researcher used qualitative methods, primarily person-to-person virtual interviews with non-identifiable open-ended questions to capture participants' narratives about their work experiences and field notes via observation. This approach allowed for flexibility in capturing engagement and trust dynamics in the workplace. Interviews and observations helped uncover different perspectives and social interactions, providing a comprehensive narrative understanding of how viewpoints are interpreted and translated into actions, (Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022). Professionals within the EDI discipline reviewed the interview questions to ensure they aligned with the study's purpose and research questions. Informed consent was an ongoing process from recruitment to the end of the study. Thus, on the said day before the interviews began, extra time were incorporate to ensure participants were comfortable and able to perform activities to ascertain inform consent such as; (a) confirm participants received the consent form via email, (b) reviewed the consent materials with each participant, (c) reiterated to participants that they had the autonomy to retract from the study at any time, and do not have to answer all questions if they did not wanted to, (d) informed participants that another session may be requested to refine any details, (e) allowed participants

to ask questions to ease any concerns or uncomfortableness about the study, and (f) asked the participants if they gave permission to participate in the study and being recorded. The interviews were conducted in a virtual platform to accommodate all participants, utilizing chosen room space that provides comfort and privacy. All data were transcribed into word document.

The study incorporated thematic analysis that identified patterns and themes from participants' lived experiences, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This involved categorizing and refining data using NVivo software to streamline the process, (Naeem et al., 2024). The goal for data analysis was to achieve data saturation, where no new information emerged from further interviews and observations, (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2024). The analysis was paired with member checking, where selected participants were re-interviewed to verify the accuracy and consistency of the data, (Motulsky, 2021). This ensured that the findings genuinely reflected the participants' perspectives, free from researcher bias, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021). The final report presented these themes clearly, aligning participants' narratives with the study's objectives. As the study assumed that live data extraction in the environment afforded the opportunity to directly experience and observe the interactions, reactions, and social settings. This immersion helped uncover diverse perspectives and knowledge about employees' experiences with EDI misalignment in the workplace. Conversely, the study acknowledged that its findings cannot be generalized due to its specific setting and small sample size of healthcare professionals. There was a risk of researcher bias and the complexity of interpreting detailed data. However, the following strategies were employed to alleviate these limitations; (a) my employment title and responsibilities allowed a working rapport with staff through the department and beyond the different sites, which served as an ice breaker to create a more casual interaction; (b) active management of personal bias via self reflection and

training were enforced to minimize personal influences, via regular debriefing with study mentor; (c) consciousness to the cultural sensitivity within the study environment and with the participants; and (d) conducted re-interviews with selected participants to cross check any inconsistencies, confirmations, or transparency about certain accounts.

Conducting a study involving the entire 31,000-strong workforce of the organization was impractical due to time, cost, and logistical constraints. Therefore, the study focused on a target population of approximately 1,300 employees within a specific department. This population was accessible due to the existing relationships with key stakeholders, which were essential for obtaining study approval and collecting data. The study aimed to address the misalignment between organizational EDI expectations and those of leadership and employees by examining the interactions between mid-level leaders and non-leader employees. To safeguard the ethical assurances of the study and its participants, the researcher began with an official verbal overview, explaining the study's purpose and the importance of safeguarding confidentiality. Participants were informed and assured of their autonomy to retract at any time without consequences. Consent for participation and recordings were requested and respected, and participants were assured that no personal identifiers will be revealed. All data will be securely stored. The researcher's dual role as both the instrument and the observer, given the long tenure with the employer can be the basis for concerns and the contamination from personal biasness, but the data collection and analysis methods were designed to ensure an unbiased investigation, focusing on the interactions between mid-level managers and employees.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed was the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. This qualitative case study aimed to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. An insightful understanding into the extent to how work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employees' influences inclusivity, offers opportunities to improving recruitment, engagement, and retention of a diverse workforce and positively fostering an inclusivity perception of the working environment (To et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024), and a more cohesive and effective working environment, ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance. The study captured the qualitative perceptions of leader and non-leader employees' lived experiences about the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment. The exploration of understanding the extent work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employee influences inclusivity, bridging the gap between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees was extracted via three research questions;

### *RQ1*

What role does work engagement between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic inclusive working environment?

***RQ2***

What role does trust between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic inclusive working environment?

***RQ3***

How does inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment?

This chapter outlines how the research data's trustworthiness was established, presents key findings in both summary and tables, and organizes themes and codes by their relation to research and interview questions. The findings were analyzed alongside the study's theoretical framework, interview perspectives, and relevant literature, followed by a concluding summary.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

The data collection instrument aided the study to directly experience and observe the interactions and reactions, and uncovered diverse perspectives and knowledge about employees' experiences with equity diversity and inclusion (EDI) misalignment in the workplace. The data analysis process was intertwined with confirmability, transferability, credibility, and dependability to achieve trust-worthiness status, (Amankwaa, 2016; Billups, 2021; Connelly, 2016). The trustworthiness of these research findings was established in an analysis that began by building the credibility of the research by incorporating the thematic analysis that identified codes or patterns and themes from participants lived experiences, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This involved categorizing and refining data using NVivo software to streamline the process, (Naeem et al., 2024), where the words and sentences from each participant were segregated into units of similarities and differences that allowed the creation of an electronic vision board that generated a cohesive and simplified logical format to process codes and themes identification and to draw conclusions that are reflective of the participants storyline. These efforts were paired with the

process of reduction and elimination via back-and-forth revision of transcripts, observation notes, and collaborating with the participants to clear up any discrepancies, affirmations, or clarity about specific narratives with the reinforcement of member checking. This entailed all participants receiving their interview transcription for revision via emails to address any edits and providing confirmation that the narratives are reflective of their lived experiences.

Discrepancies were addressed with a follow-up interview to verify the accuracy and consistency of the data, (Motulsky, 2021). This ensured that the findings genuinely reflected the participants' perspectives, free from the researcher's bias, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021). The end goal of saturation for this research data analysis was achieved when no new information emerged from further interviews and observations; a recognition that the data was fully scrutinized, (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2024).

The transferability of this study was within the ability to chronicle detailed narratives and the utilization of purposive sampling for participant selection, (Ames et al., 2019; Billups, 2021), in conducting research that is similar to settings and happenings. The detailed narratives of the participants expressions and interactions facilitated the use of the NVivo application to illustrative translate what was being convey by the participants from the transcripts and observational notes. Dependability was established and reinforced via the confirmation from participants that the thoughts and expressions being illustrated are indeed their own and not of the researcher. Confirming that there was no deviation in the data analysis process and there was consistency in the application methods in safeguarding the data analysis process from the researcher's own bias. Confirmability in this research was strengthened via the data collection process that entailed recruitment and interview protocols, a virtual interview approach with semi-structured questions with no personal identifiers. This process facilitated the research findings

rooted in the compiled narrated account from live observations about the participants' exchanges, significances, practices via the similarities and differences of opinions and behaviors, (Adler, 2022; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020). Concluding with the construction of a thorough narrative of the environment and its members, complemented with a scrutiny of the data for themes and patterns via the thematic analysis, (Bloomberg, 2018; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Yin, 2017). The final findings are reflective of the themes that aligned with the participants' narratives within the study's objectives, reinforcing the trustworthiness of the data collection and management.

## **Results**

All participants contributed valuable narratives that reflected their authentic perspectives on the misalignment between organizational EDI expectations and those of leadership and employees in healthcare. With the assistance of EDI professionals, the interview questions rooted in prior diversity research findings and constructed towards the illumination of engagement and trust influences on inclusivity in the working environment were developed to better understand the extent to which work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employees influences inclusivity. All interview questions were united with both pertinent research literature and respective references, please see Appendix A.

The excerpts from the volunteers' transcription were leveraged to illuminate the outcomes and the basis for the qualitative and thematic analysis process of identifying, assessing and reporting patterns to reinforce the trustworthiness of the data exploration and understanding, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Several of the volunteers replies to the questions and reactions were interrelating. This qualitative case study involved 12 professionals combining both leaders and non-leaders within the study environment. The volunteers' names and sub-departmental location

were omitted from this study to fiercely protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the volunteers and the continuity of future scientific advancement in research. Three volunteers were male and nine were female. There were two managers, one supervisor, six technologists, two administrative support, and one plant operation specialist who all shared their experiences. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic context and the general name of study participants, gender, and position. This research boasts all 12 participants were diverse in ethnicity and culture, offering diverse perspectives as it relates to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees.

**Table 1.**

*Participant Demographics Context (as per interview order)*

Participant	Role	Gender
Participant 1	Administrative Support	Female
Participant 2	Administrative Support	Female
Participant 3	Technologist	Female
Participant 4	Technologist	Female
Participant 5	Manager	Male
Participant 6	Technologist	Female
Participant 7	Manager	Female
Participant 8	Plant Operation Specialist	Male
Participant 9	Technologist	Female
Participant 10	Technologist	Female
Participant 11	Technologist	Male
Participant 12	Supervisor	Female

On the day of each scheduled interviews, before each interviews began, extra time were incorporated to ensure participants were comfortable and were able to performed activities to ascertain inform consent such as; (a) acknowledgement of receipt of the participant signed consent form, (b) reviewed the consent materials with each participant to confirm participation, (c) reiterated to participants that they had the autonomy to retract from the study at any time, and that they were not mandated to answer all questions if they did not wanted to, (d) informed

participants that another session may be requested to refine any details, and (e) allowed participants to ask questions to ease any concerns or uncomfortableness about seeking access to their privilege experiences and perspectives to better understand what contributes to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment as the data collection process was sensitive to the environmental climate from such a highly publicized discussed issue.

The data collected was enthroned in the thematic analysis that identified codes and themes from the participants' lived experiences, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This involved uploading transcripts of the interviews, categorizing, and refining the participants excerpts using NVivo software to streamline the process, (Naeem et al., 2024), where the words and sentences from each participant were segregated into units of similarities and differences that allowed the creation of an electronic vision board that generated a cohesive and simplified logical format to process codes and themes identification and to draw conclusions that are reflective of the participants storyline, (Adler, 2022; Belotto, 2018; Billups, 2021; Bloomberg, 2018; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Yin, 2017). These efforts were paired with the process of reduction and elimination via back-and-forth revision of transcripts, observation notes, and collaborating with the participants to clear up any discrepancies, affirmations, or clarity about specific narratives, (Motulsky, 2021). This entailed all participants receiving their interview transcription for revision via emails to address any edits and providing confirmation that the narratives are reflective of their lived experiences. This was to ensure that the findings genuinely reflected the participants' perspectives, free from the researcher's bias, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021).

This section describes the theme generation in more detail in relation to the research questions that were recognized from the process of itemizing, categorizing, reducing, and eliminating (see tables 2 & 3) via continuous revision of the excerpt descriptions of the participants' experiences to produce the cohesive illumination of the insightful narratives that was obtained from all the participants in relation to the research questions.

**Table 2.**

*Codes Identified During Thematic Analysis of Participants Interview.*

Codes	Respondents
Collaborative efforts driven by organization's mission	12
Feelings of trust	6
Feelings of mistrust	8
Impression of micromanagement	2
Impression of unacknowledgement of efforts	4
Impression of lacking access to participate in workflow processes and decisions	5
Impression that inputs are encourage and considered	1
Interactive exchanges via groups	2
Interactive exchanges via transactions	2
Interactive exchanges via team support	6
Interactive exchanges via open communication	10
High quality of engagement	8
Low quality of engagement	8
Perception of inclusion	9
Perception of exclusion	9

**Table 3.***Data Analysis of Grouping the Codes and Commonalities into Themes.*

Themes	Grouping of Codes	Total Respondents
<b>Engagement &amp; trust</b> via interpersonal relationships are efforts to connect	Collaborative efforts driven by organization's mission	12
Employee engagement reflects the impression of the working environment	Impression of micromanagement/ Impression of unacknowledgement of efforts/ Impression of lacking access to participate in workflow processes and decisions/ Impression that inputs are encourage and considered	12
<b>Engagement &amp; trust</b> via interpersonal relationships are efforts to connect	Feelings of trust and mistrust	12
Trust empowerment is relational to the interactive exchanges between employee within the working environment	Interactive exchanges via groups/ Interactive exchanges via transactions/ Interactive exchanges via team support/ Interactive exchanges via open communication	12
The effectiveness of inclusivity hinges on collective support from the workforce	High and low quality of engagement	12
Intentional inclusion can inadvertently reflect exclusion	Perception of inclusion and exclusion	12

***Research Question 1. What role does work engagement between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic working environment?***

Research question one sought to understand the role of work engagement in fostering an authentic working environment between leaders and employees. Participants were asked interview questions to share collaboration that made them felt particularly engaged and connected to the organization mission, and an instance where they felt their inputs were not valued and impactful, and how did it impact their work; as a pathway to gain insights into what role does work engagement between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic working environment via their lived engagement experiences. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, the participants responses highlighted two themes; engagement & trust via interpersonal relationships are efforts to connect, and employee engagement reflects the impression of the working environment. The participants responses highlighted their interpersonal relationships as conduits for engagement & trust to connect. For example, Participant 2 contributed to a team-building project that fostered a positive workplace. Participant 4 discussed feeling disconnected in the past but now values teamwork as key to aligning with institutional goals, noting teaching helps new employees connect. Two participants echoed the teaching connection through their dedication to training future laboratory professionals, highlighting student engagement and witnessing milestones as rewarding aspects of their roles. Some of the participants responses revealed the quality of the interactions within their various work relationships. For example, Participants 1 and 5 described collaborating with nurses to ensure they had the necessary knowledge and skills, such as completing competencies to operate patient care machinery. Participant 5 also reported establishing and implementing a rotation for nursing staff in the laboratory to promote laboratory safety awareness, enabling nurses to better understand relevant

procedures and practices for error prevention and compliance. Participant 9 stated that they collaborated with colleagues and vendors during the institutional transition to EPIC electronic health record software, noting increased involvement when working with lab-specific software due to opportunities for input on decisions. Five of the participants responses reflected daily collaborations with colleagues to complete tasks in the continuity of providing patient care.

The participants engagement reflected the impression of the working environment, as some noted that their assigned roles affected their level of engagement by providing opportunities for more interaction and productive exchanges amongst employees relatively regularly. For instance, participant 3 indicated that advancement allowed participation in management activities and facilitated interactions with staff. Participant 11 noted that their experience and expertise were used to fill a role focused on education, aiming to support best practices and service continuity through training and navigating evolving trends. Despite the participants perceived that their assigned roles provided them with specific rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to express their varying perspectives, several engagement challenges emerged in the work environment, such as micromanagement and undervaluing or dismissal of input. For instance, Participant 1 described a situation where a supervisor dismissed a suggestion for streamlining reporting, preferring an existing template, which led to feelings of being micromanaged, and participant 4 also echoed the similar feelings of experiencing micromanagement in their daily work environment; noted becoming less engaged due to the alleged impact on mental health and performance. Participant 3 recounted being interrupted during a task performance, feeling that their feedback was not considered, which resulted in reduced engagement. Participant 8 referenced providing research-based suggestions for improving building operations, which were not adopted by management, who preferred current

established procedures. Participant 10 recalled instances when improvement suggestions were rejected by management and coworkers, citing negative feedback as contributing to reduced motivation. Participant 12 expressed that budget constraints limited the consideration of their input, reducing the impact of their contributions. Four participants applied their knowledge and expertise in collaboration with various stakeholders to complete assigned tasks and projects, but they reported a lack of recognition for their contributions, which affected their engagement level and behavioral practices. For instance, participant 2 note that their labor went unrecognized for an extended period of time causing feelings of not being valued, participant 6 stated that their project inputs were shared but not acknowledged, while similar ideas from other collaborators were incorporated into the final project. Participant 7 described collaborating with stakeholders to update an intranet page; after submitting the finished product, feedback suggested additional marketing features, and subsequent versions did not reflect their team's recommendations. They noted that this affected team morale after extensive effort was invested. Participant 11 recounted working on a high-profile project where only the project lead received recognition, despite contributions from all team members. From their perception, this situation was observed to lower morale, motivation, and engagement, ultimately impacting work performance. On the other hand, participant 5 expressed that they never experienced their inputs not being valued in their working environment.

***Research Question 2. What role does trust between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic working environment?***

Research question two sought to understand the role of trust between leaders and employees in fostering an authentic working environment. Participants were asked to provide their lived experiences on trust or mis-trust to gain insights into the role it played in creating an

authentic working environment. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, the participants' responses highlighted one theme: engagement and trust with an emphasis on trust via interpersonal relationships as efforts to connect. The participants' experiences highlighted that trust between leaders and employees played a central role in shaping an authentic work environment. Their respective responses reflected impression of relations or interactions that did not or disrupted a meaningful on-going connection in the working environment that influenced their connection based on trust or mistrust. Five participants described how trust with their leaders who they saw as upright, open-minded, and supportive positively affected their motivation and productivity. Three participants emphasized that trust was developed through fair leadership and reciprocal relationships. Participant 1 appreciated their supervisor's detailed appraisal feedback, while Participant 4 valued being able to share personal matters, trusting that confidentiality would be preserved. Participant 9 was initially hesitant but highlighted support during a difficult period as building trust. Two participants noted that their managers' confidence and accessibility fostered mutual dependency and effective performance. While participant 7 felt transparency-built trust, also observed that new employees often resisted change or reflected mistrust due to previous workplace norms and experiences. Participant 7 observation was echoed by some participants who highlighted their attitudes about mistrust to both current and past workplace experiences. For instance, some participants recounted experiences and causes that eroded trust, as there was the forethought on the equivalent expectation between the said participants of the leader member relationship. For example, Participant 2 lost trust when confidential information was shared by a leader, and Participant 3 described feeling excluded from a team despite meeting all requirements, which led to perceptions of unfairness and inconsistency. Concerns about equity, as participant 5 reported favoritism in shift scheduling, leading them to monitor fairness more

closely. Participant 10 mentioned unequal access to resources and unaddressed concerns. Participant 6 shared that micromanagement led to feelings of mistrust. Participant 11 recounted their suggestions being dismissed leading to reduced trust in others. Finally, one participant noted differences between trust in leaders and peers; where they experienced support from management but sensed artificiality and resentment among coworkers following special accommodations, which invoked mistrust within the team.

***Research Question 3. How does inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment?***

Research question three aimed to investigate the impact of inclusivity on trust and engagement in the workplace. Participants were asked interview questions to provide their lived experiences on support and transparency efforts from leaders and members in fostering a more trusting and engaging work environment, and how those efforts can be improved to gain insights into the impact inclusivity on trust and engagement. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, the participants' responses highlighted three themes- trust empowerment is relational to the interactive exchanges between employee within the working environment, the effectiveness of inclusivity hinges on the collective support from the workforce, and intentional inclusion can inadvertently reflect exclusion. All participants described comparable experiences regarding the established culture of communication and its functions. For example, regular meetings facilitated information sharing and feedback, communication enabled team members to volunteer, and address challenges collaboratively, operational information was accessible through daily logbooks, along with training materials. Participant 9 highlighted that daily documentation contributed to transparency and supported the practice of maintaining positive morale among staff. While other participants stated that open communication helped foster team support during

completing tasks and especially appreciated during various life events and building trust. For Example, participant 12 highlighted the reciprocal nature of communication openness with their manager: “My manager is highly approachable, and I reciprocate, which enhances workflow efficiency, supports oversight of deliverables, and promotes awareness of occurrences affecting both staff and students”. The value of transparent communication was further echoed by participant 6: “There is openness, honesty, regular feedback, and a solution-oriented approach through information sharing, all of which support efficient operations”. Participant 7 affirmed that communication increases environmental awareness: “Open communication facilitates understanding of workplace dynamics as well as events impacting individuals' personal lives.” Finally, participant 11 emphasized the importance of having a safe environment for exchanging diverse ideas and perspectives through platforms such as in-person discussions, team huddles, and providing operational assistance as needed. Similar sentiments was share by participant 5, in a leadership role chose proactive behaviors, despite occasionally feeling the need to mask their true feelings when interacting with others saying, “I promote an open-door policy to maintain accessibility for staff. I consistently emphasize teamwork, as it is our lab and environment. I aim to lead by example through visible presence during friendly rounds at the start of each shift to stay connected with staff and remain informed about ongoing matters”.

Some of the participants’ responses reflected that both employees and leaders were perceived to be unintentionally and intentionally indulging in exclusionary behaviors. For example, participants highlighted concerns such as the formation of cliques or groups where some employees were perceived as exhibiting preferential behaviors by collaborating primarily with colleagues they regularly interacted with or were more socially familiar with. For instance, Participant 3 noted transactional approaches: “There is a culture where transparency is applied

selectively for convenience, including the discreet sharing of performance information to supervisors or managers as a means for personal advancement.” Similarly, Participant 4 “From my perspective, equity within the team is lacking due to the presence of cliques or groups that shape team interactions for their own convenience.” In contrast, Participant 9 acknowledged that group communication could enhance engagement among members, stating, “I recognize that shared information and communication within groups is often more engaging; however, excessive sharing by certain individuals can be overwhelming or create negativity.” They also remarked, “Managers and leadership must recognize that project deliverables and scope may prompt leads to repeatedly work with familiar team members whose skills are well known, resulting in reduced opportunities for others to participate, train, and develop through exposure.”

Many participants highlighted specific practices they associated with high-quality engagement and a sense of belonging. For instance, Participant 1 emphasized the accessibility of opportunities to share and receive input, “There are consistent one-on-one meetings that foster an environment conducive to questions and answers, where multiple perspectives are both shared and considered.” Visibility was consistently recognized as a key component of effective engagement. Participant 3 remarked, “The current supervisor is significantly more interactive and engaging, extending beyond mere policy enforcement. Similarly, Participant 5 noted the critical role of mid-level leaders: “Managers and supervisors shoulder the responsibility of engaging staff, maintaining visibility, and addressing concerns and queries”. Participant 8 added, “I appreciate that the current manager is highly present and actively involved during work hours”. In addition, Participant 3 emphasized the importance of leaders demonstrating respect for employees and recognizing their value: “Leaders should be more open-minded and accessible, treating staff as individuals with unique abilities who contribute meaningfully to operations.”

Special events were also mentioned; as participant 12 observed, “During the Annual Employee Appreciation Week, Directors and Managers engage directly with staff through the distribution of gifts and ice cream treats.” Similarly, participants expressed the need for enhanced team-building activities, equitable access to information and advancement opportunities. For instance, Participant 1 commented, “Currently, group team-building activities are held twice a year. Increasing their frequency could promote staff engagement and help break down barriers.” Participant 2 advocated for broadening opportunities for all employees, stating, “Facilitating one-on-one interactions can encourage open discussions regarding future plans, decisions, employee concerns, and advancement based on performance rather than solely on educational background or tenure.” A similar call from participant 10 where, “Managers must enhance efforts to create an inclusive environment through individual goal setting, stronger feedback delivery, transparent communication, and regular recognition of staff achievements.”

Communication from leadership was identified as instrumental in promoting awareness and enhancing employees’ sense of value. As Participant 6 explained, “From a board perspective, town hall meetings have facilitated understanding of both the current and future state of the organization, thereby encouraging open communication and staff feedback.” Participant 8 commented, “The Director circulates information about seminars, webinars, and training opportunities, supporting our skills development and marketability for advancement”. Finally participant 11 described initiatives such as implementing ‘safe spaces’ for small group discussions, improving information sharing, and enhancing the organizational newsletter to serve as a valuable resource that keeps staff informed of departmental developments, recognitions, and upcoming events, thus fostering a sense of community.

Participants described behaviors indicative of low engagement from leadership, impacting their perceptions and weakening leader-member relationships. For instance, some of the participants noted a lack of active efforts from leadership to promote an engaging and trusting environment. Such as leadership minimal interaction, primarily communicating via email and seldom making in-person visits, which was seen as disengagement or even segregation. There was also the lack of transparency and sincere effort to address staff concerns; one participant felt management focused only on goals without supporting staff needs. Participants perceived the lack of open communication from leadership whom seemed to handout mostly recommendations instead of acknowledging staff contributions. Finally the demands from project completion was cited for reduction in engagement, along overloaded inboxes making email correspondence ineffective for building relationships.

The participants highlighted efforts that influence their inclusive and exclusive perception in the working environment. For example, participant 9 noted that leaders made deliberate efforts at inclusion, through emails, but these actions were sometimes perceived as exclusive, as leadership communication were perceived as impersonal. Participants indicated a preference for greater visibility and improved communication and transparency from leaders; for instance, participant 6 stated that upper leadership should focus on enhancing their visibility, communication, and transparency practices within the workplace, as such efforts could positively impact members' self-esteem, work habits, and performance. Overall, participants emphasized the need for consistency in communicating departmental goals to support inclusivity. Participant 5 stated there should be improved communication among mid-level and upper leadership for consistent dissemination of information to staff. While participant 8 mentioned that “unclear communication could affect job engagement making it difficult to see how individual roles

contribute to institutional missions”, participant 11 highlighted concerns “over information being shared with other laboratories before leadership could communicate with their own respective teams. This lack of uniformity in the communication sometimes left both staff and mid-level leadership unprepared to respond to queries or concerns”.

Participants commented on the importance of collective workforce support for effective inclusivity- suggesting leaders should be intentional about inclusive practices. Participant 4 recommended moving beyond general faceless email notifications or annual recognition events, noting that their lab maintained engagement through regular gatherings such as potlucks and cultural events”. Participant 1 concurred via their promotion of increasing the annual team building activities from twice to more frequently. Participant 12 who recalled pre-pandemic actions that encouraged community building, suggesting leadership should increase engagement and accessibility, for example, by joining staff-initiated activities, sponsoring outside events; and the acknowledgment of staff achievements via recognition activities noted by participant 10. Participant 7 also recommended engaging on the multi-level of both the clinical and business scope to foster a cohesive reflection of policies and processes to better understand the requirements and implication of the current and future work environment. Participant 9 also observed a need for improved uniformity in communicating recruitment and advancement opportunities throughout the department, as there were claim where advancement opportunities were not advertised equitably, potentially limiting career growth for some individuals. Participant 2 noted that advancement should be based on performance and not necessarily based on degrees or years of tenure. Such sentiments were echoed by participant 3 as they felt their interest to join the new team at another location was overlooked by management.

## Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

In this study participants response have shown that there was an advocacy for inclusion through the constant interactive exchanges in the workplace that were fashioned by employees' daily practices and experiences, a trend that was highlighted in prior studies, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023). As the participants interactive experiences reflected the Social Exchange Theory (SET) where the emphasis of the relationship progression or deterioration is connected to the parties within the relationship assessing the pros and cons related to reciprocity of interaction, influencing the level and type of exchanges to be had, as exchanges varies in value (Blau, 1964; Umrani et al., 2024). Participants described their experiences to connect with work engagement and collaboration, emphasizing that feeling connected to their colleagues and the organization's mission enhanced their motivation and satisfaction. Their impression of the working environment reflected positive engagement such as collaboration on team building and staff events fostered a sense of connection to the organization's mission, mentoring students and new employees was seen as highly rewarding, reinforcing commitment to the organization's goals, partnerships with other healthcare professionals, such as nurses, improved patient care and increased awareness of laboratory procedures, involvement in major institutional changes (like transitioning to new software systems) offered opportunities for meaningful contributions.

This study reinforces prior researchers findings of engagement & trust via interpersonal relationships are efforts to connect, as the participants' interactions within leader member exchange (LMX) relationships revealed that they were of low and high quality where there was balance or imbalance of information exchanges that either increased or decreased trust and engagement among the parties, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al.,

2017; Hafiz Ghufran et al., 2022; Jawahar et al., 2019; Khair et al., 2024). For example, in this study high-quality engagement was marked by emotional connection, regular feedback, and opportunities for collaboration. Low-quality engagement, characterized by a lack of leader involvement and recognition, diminished motivation and trust among staff, (Kataria et al., 2013). Thus, work engagement and trust were influential to the quality of LMX produced between parties of the relationship, (Khair et al., 2024; Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022; Wagner & Koob, 2022). The participants narratives illustrated a strong desire among employees to be included, recognized, and able to contribute meaningfully, but both positive collaborations and negative experiences with unrecognized input significantly influenced their sense of connection, engagement, and overall job satisfaction. This study revealed several challenges and barriers to participants' sense of engagement. Some participants felt their inputs were undervalued or ignored, leading to frustration, reduced engagement, and diminished motivation. Instances of micromanagement or lack of recognition for contributions caused disengagement and had a negative emotional impact. Additionally, budget constraints and structural decisions sometimes limited the ability for employee input to have an impact.

In this study the participants perceived insider status (PIS) revealed that their relationships engagements have progressively expanded and contributed to their perception of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace, (Buengeler et al., 2018; Naseer et al., 2023; Rezai et al., 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al., 2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023), as their experiences mirrored the social exchange theory (SET) , their trust or breaches of trust between leaders and themselves increased or decreased the perception of efforts in motion towards the cultivation of an authentic work environment via active or inactive efforts and role-modeling behavior that depicted whether or not leader and member shared the same principles, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al.,

2018; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Trust enabled participants to share their ideas, seek guidance, and felt valued within the organization. And thereby, signaling the influence of trust empowerment being relational to the interactive exchanges between employee within the working environment. The participants noted that both trust and mistrust were shaped by ongoing interactions where they continually assessed their leaders' behaviors and intentions, (Blau, 1964; Umrani et al., 2024). For example, the participants who perceived their leaders as supportive, transparent, and respectful, trust flourished resulting in greater engagement, cooperation, and job satisfaction. Conversely, participants instances of mistrust arose from perceived inequities such as favoritism, lack of transparency, micromanagement, or sharing confidential information, lack of recognition, or failure to act on staff input, leading them to experienced felt frustration, disengagement, and a diminished sense of belonging.

This study reinforced the effectiveness of inclusivity hinges on the collective support from the organization and its leaders via the participants perspectives that leaders need to be more intentional in their communication and engagement tactics to relay messages about their working culture and environment, as the leaders role and authority within the working environment enhanced their abilities to sway perceptions of inclusive-exclusive via alignment of their active partial or impartial efforts, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al., 2021; Ferdman, 2014, p.4; Howard et al., 2020; Liu et al, 2022; Malik et al., 2023; Seo et al., 2018, Shore & Chung 2023; Woods et al, 2024). The participants valued such efforts of visibility, accessibility, and efforts to build relationships from leaders via open-door policy, engagement in team activities, and being able to contribute and recognition of contributions can influence employees to feel included and valued, (Dawson et al., 2024; Liu et al, 2022; Naseer et al., 2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023). They also highlighted the need for aligning policies and practices to better understand the

requirements and implication of the current and future work environment, a notion reflected by previous researchers who highlighted inconsistency in aligning policies and practices on diversity and inclusion between organization and lived experienced of employees, (Jeronimo., et al, 2022; Morin & Burrell, 2024). Previous studies and the participants in this study perceived the presence of groups and transactional efforts, as well as inequitable opportunities for advancement within work relationships as efforts of unintentional or intentional exclusion, (Adamson et al., 2021; Ferman, 2017). The efforts of unintentional or intentional exclusion were seen as barriers that undermined trust and engagement, as participants saw trust as a system of shared expectations and the emotional need for connectedness and belonging in relationships or groups within their environment, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020; Shore et al., 2011; Wagner & koob, 2022). Signaling the need for countering exclusion via the ability to balance the differentiation and uniqueness of others and of self to minimize exhibiting exclusionary behaviors that would seem to render perceptions of not belonging, as noted by previous studies, (Dawson et al., 2024; Shore et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2023; Howard et al., 2020).

### **Summary**

The study addressed the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. Using the qualitative case study approach the research investigated to better understand what contributed to the misalignment between the desired expectations of organizational EDI and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area of the United States. The findings suggest that improving engagement and trust can enhance recruitment, retention, and the overall perception of inclusivity in the workplace, leading to a more cohesive and effective

organizational environment. The study captures the lived experiences of both leaders and employees to understand the gap between organizational EDI goals and real-world experiences, guided by three research questions focused on engagement, trust, and inclusivity.

The study's data collection and analysis followed rigorous procedures to ensure trustworthiness. By directly observing and documenting employees' experiences with EDI misalignment, the researchers established credibility through thematic analysis and the use of NVivo software to identify patterns and themes from participant narratives, (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Naeem et al., 2024). The process incorporated ongoing revision and member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts. Discrepancies were resolved with follow-up interviews, ensuring that the findings authentically reflected participants' perspectives and minimized researcher bias, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021). Saturation was reached when no new information emerged, confirming thoroughness, (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Naeem et al., 2024). Transferability was supported by detailed participant narratives and purposive sampling, making the findings applicable to similar settings, (Ames et al., 2019; Billups, 2021). Dependability was ensured by consistency in data collection and analysis methods, reinforced by participant confirmation of their own thoughts and expressions. Confirmability was maintained by transparent recruitment and interview protocols, semi-structured virtual interviews, and strict anonymity. The final findings represent themes aligned with participant experiences and the study's objectives, demonstrating the reliability and integrity of the research process.

Interview questions, designed with input from EDI experts and rooted in existing diversity research, focused on how engagement and trust impact workplace inclusivity. Twelve diverse professionals—both leaders and non-leaders, representing a range of roles and

backgrounds—shared their authentic experiences through confidential interviews. Their responses, presented anonymously and analyzed thematically, provided valuable insights into the factors influencing EDI alignment and the challenges faced within the organizational environment. Prior to each interview, participants were given ample time to ensure comfort and informed consent, including reviewing consent materials, emphasizing their autonomy, and addressing any questions or concerns. The data collected from these interviews underwent careful thematic analysis using NVivo software, which involved organizing transcripts into meaningful codes and themes based on similarities and differences in participants' experiences, (Adler, 2022; Belotto, 2018; Billups, 2021; Bloomberg, 2018; Duesbery & Twyman, 2020; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Monga, 2016; Naeem et al., 2024; Yin, 2017). The process also included iterative revisions, participant feedback, and clarification to confirm that the findings accurately represented participants' perspectives without researcher bias, (Billups, 2021; Grant & Lincoln, 2021, Motulsky, 2021). This ensured that the results authentically reflected the lived experiences and insights of those involved in the study.

Research Question 1 explored how work engagement between leaders and employees contributes to an authentic work environment. Interview responses revealed two main themes: engagement and trust are built through interpersonal relationships, and employee engagement reflects the overall workplace atmosphere. Positive experiences, such as team-building, teaching, and collaborative projects, fostered a sense of connection and alignment with organizational goals. Participants described meaningful collaborations that enhanced workplace positivity and professional growth, such as mentoring, training, and improving operational procedures. However, challenges emerged, including micromanagement, lack of recognition, undervalued input, and budget constraints, which led to reduced motivation, engagement, and morale. Despite

some participants feeling consistently valued, others reported that dismissive leadership practices hindered their ability to contribute, ultimately affecting performance and workplace satisfaction. Overall, the responses highlight that authentic engagement was facilitated by supportive relationships and recognition, while barriers such as limited acknowledgment and restrictive management negatively impact employee engagement and trust.

The responses to research question 2 reveal that trust between leaders and employees played a vital role in fostering an authentic work environment. Participants described how trust, built through supportive, fair, and accessible leadership, positively influenced motivation, productivity, and performance. Trust was often developed through reciprocal relationships, transparency, and confidentiality, with several participants highlighting specific positive experiences with their supervisors or managers. However, the absence of trust stemming from issues such as breached confidentiality, favoritism, unequal access to resources, micromanagement, and dismissed suggestions led to disengagement, perceptions of unfairness, and diminished motivation. Some participants also distinguished between trust in leaders and trust among peers, noting that team dynamics and coworkers' attitudes further impact their sense of trust and belonging. Overall, the participants responses underscore that both trust and mistrust was shaped by ongoing interpersonal interactions, and that trust was essential for engagement, effective performance, and a sense of inclusion in the workplace.

Research Question 3 examined how inclusivity influences trust and engagement within the workplace, drawing on participants' real-life experiences with leadership and team dynamics. The interview responses revealed three central themes: trust empowerment is shaped by ongoing interactions between employees, the effectiveness of inclusivity depends on collective workforce support, and intentional inclusion can sometimes result in exclusion.

Employees and leaders agreed that practices such as open communication, transparency, regular meetings, and visible leadership are crucial for building trust and engagement. Team support, knowledge sharing, and opportunities for input were consistently valued. Leadership accessibility through open-door policies, in-person engagement, and frequent feedback was highlighted as effective in promoting a sense of belonging and collaboration.

However, some participants identified barriers to inclusivity. Exclusionary behaviors such as favoritism, the formation of cliques, limited transparency, and communication gaps were reported. Transactional or impersonal communication such as email-only interactions, sometimes undermined trust and engagement. Inconsistent dissemination of information, inequitable access to advancement opportunities, and lack of leader visibility were other concerns.

Participants recommended greater frequency of team-building activities, improved recognition of staff achievements, equitable access to information, and more intentional leader involvement in daily operations. They expressed a desire for advancement opportunities based on performance rather than tenure or educational background and called for consistent and transparent communication from leadership. Overall, the participants responses showed that genuine inclusion supported by proactive, transparent, and visible leadership can enhance trust and engagement, while gaps in communication and equity can result in feelings of exclusion and disengagement. Participants emphasized the importance of intentional collective efforts to create a cohesive and supportive work environment.

The overall findings of this study highlighted that participants consistently advocated for workplace inclusion, with daily interactive exchanges shaping their experiences, (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Dhanani et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023). Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), the research revealed that the quality of relationships and reciprocity in interactions significantly

influenced employees' engagement, trust, and sense of belonging, (Blau, 1964; Umrani et al., 2024). Positive outcomes such as collaboration, mentorship, and meaningful contributions enhanced motivation and satisfaction, while negative experiences like ignored input or micromanagement diminished engagement. The findings reinforced previous research, (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2023; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Hafiz Ghufuran et al., 2022; Jawahar et al., 2019; Khair et al., 2024)., showing that high-quality leader-member exchanges (LMX) were marked by emotional connection, regular feedback, and collaborative opportunities, fostering trust and engagement. Conversely, low-quality exchanges, characterized by lack of leader involvement or recognition, led to frustration and disengagement. Perceptions of inclusion and exclusion were closely tied to how employees felt about their insider status and the trust cultivated or breached by leadership behaviors, (Arif et al., 2023; Buengeler et al., 2018; Epitropaki et al., 2017; Naseer et al., 2023; Rezai et al., 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al., 2023; Xintian & Peng, 2023). The participants emphasized the importance of visible, accessible, and communicative leadership in promoting inclusivity. Efforts such as open-door policies, team activities, and recognition were seen as vital for making staff feel valued. However, barriers like inconsistent communication, favoritism, and inequitable advancement opportunities contributed to feelings of exclusion and undermined trust. Ultimately, the study highlighted that genuine inclusion, supported by intentional, transparent, and consistent leadership, was essential for enhancing engagement, trust, and a cohesive work environment.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary**

The problem addressed was the misalignment of organizational Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand what contributed to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the Metro area of New York and New Jersey of the United States. An insightful understanding into the extent to how work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employees' influences inclusivity, offers opportunities to improving recruitment, engagement, and retention of a diverse workforce and positively fostering an inclusivity perception of the working environment (To et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024), and a more cohesive and effective working environment, ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance. This study captured the qualitative perceptions of leader and non-leader employees regarding their lived experiences with the misalignment between organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment. This study employed a case study methodology, incorporating in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, to gain an understanding of the experiences of employees and leaders across multiple locations within a healthcare organization. This study examined the alignment between organizational expectations for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and daily practices, with a focus on the dynamics between leaders and members. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to capture complex, real-life behaviors and ongoing processes. While ethnography was considered, it was not employed due to the extensive time commitments necessary to capture sufficient data for a thorough analysis in fulfillment of the research purpose, as well as financial constraints.

Based on the results of this study, it was highlighted that workplace inclusion and engagement thrive on daily interactions and reciprocal relationships among employees. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), the study demonstrated that participants' motivation and satisfaction was strongly linked to their sense of connection to their colleagues and the organization's mission. Positive engagement was fostered through collaboration, mentoring, and recognition, while low engagement resulted from a lack of leader involvement and appreciation. Trust played a crucial role: supportive and transparent leadership boosted trust and job satisfaction, whereas favoritism or a lack of recognition led to frustration and disengagement. This study also highlights that the perceived insider status of feeling valued and included depends on fair and open communication, recognition, and opportunities for involvement. Barriers to inclusion included micromanagement, ignored input, budgetary constraints, and inequitable advancement opportunities, all of which eroded trust and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, both trust and inclusion depended on intentional visible efforts from leaders to engage employees and foster a supportive environment, while unintentional or intentional exclusion undermined these efforts.

This study's findings was limited by its small, localized sample and potential bias from both participants and researcher. While interviews were shorter than planned, they yielded detailed insights that were sometimes challenging to interpret. To address these limitations, the researcher used personal rapport, active bias management, cultural sensitivity, and follow-up interviews to strengthen the study's reliability. This chapter identifies and discusses the main practical implications of the study's findings directly responding to the research questions outlined in Chapter Four, and provides actionable insights for practitioners and researchers. It concludes with a summary of the key findings.

## Discussion

This study examined factors contributing to the misalignment between the organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in healthcare settings within the New York and New Jersey Metro area, based on three research questions: what role do work engagement between leaders and employees play in fostering an authentic working environment, what role do trust between leaders and employees play in fostering an authentic working environment, and how do inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment. Participant responses led to the identification of five themes, which are discussed below along with their implications for each research question.

### ***RQ1: What role do work engagement between leaders and employees play in fostering an authentic working environment?***

RQ1 aimed to understand the role of work engagement in fostering an authentic working environment between leaders and employees. The participants' responses highlighted two themes: (a) engagement & trust via interpersonal relationships are efforts to connect, and (b) employee engagement reflects the impression of the working environment. The research revealed that perceptions of fairness directly impacted engagement between leaders and employees in promoting an authentic working environment. As participants noted, the significance of standardizing advancement processes, resource distribution, transparent decision-making, and even day-to-day mechanisms, such as shift scheduling was emphasized. The findings are consistent with those of Mansoor et al. (2021), who noted that employees attributed significance to occurrences, practices and processes they had encountered, which justified employers' values and efforts in cultivating an inclusive environment of diversity. The findings also highlighted persistent barriers to engagement, including micromanagement, a lack of recognition, and the

dismissal of employee input. However, addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from management to empower staff by recognizing contributions and valuing diverse perspectives. When the participants perceived that their inputs were genuinely considered, they were more likely to remain motivated and engaged, thereby fueling both individual fulfillment and organizational effectiveness. Similarly noted by Liu et al. (2022), employees felt connected through access to contribute to and participate in processes and decision-making. Conversely, as noted by Jerónimo et al. (2022), the perceived presence of variations in reciprocity fairness in relation to the quality of engagement and exchange contributions, decreased participants' interest in engaging. Empowering employees to recognize and support one another, transcending hierarchical boundaries, can help cultivate a more cohesive and resilient culture. As the participants noted, the significance of investing in team-building initiatives, creating formal avenues for peer recognition, and maintaining safe spaces for feedback can reinforce mutual respect and acceptance (Dawson et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2023).

***RQ2: What role do trust between leaders and employees play in fostering an authentic working environment?***

RQ2 aimed to understand the role of trust between leaders and employees in fostering an authentic working environment. The participants' responses highlighted one theme: engagement and trust, with an emphasis on trust through interpersonal relationships, as a key effort to connect. The findings underscore the pivotal role that trust plays in shaping employees' and leaders' engagement, motivation, and overall workplace satisfaction, promotion of an authentic working environment. As noted by prior studies, trust does not emerge by accident; it is intentionally built through reciprocal relationships, as the quality of the trust and exchanges within the leader-member (LMX) relationship is unique with each respective individual

(Aggarwal et al., 2020; Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Despite both being vital for team dynamics and overall performance, a nuanced implication of the findings is the distinction between trust in leadership and trust among peer relationships. Similarly highlighted by Kataria et al. (2013) and Sabharwal (2014), employees' fulfillment of the need to belong was influenced by the value of the relationships between self and others. When the participants perceived practices of inconsistency or exclusion—such as the mismanagement of confidential information, or the disregarded of shared suggestions—team cohesion and collaboration suffered. When leaders were perceived to be transparent, fair, and approachable, it cultivated an environment in which employees felt safe to express ideas, share concerns, and participate openly in organizational life, (Buengeler et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Ly, 2024; Naseer et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2024; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Thus, it is safe to conclude that trust reinforces a sense of psychological safety, which is crucial for authentic engagement, and underscores the interdependence of trust, equity, and inclusion in foating authentic engagement.

***RQ3: How does inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment?***

RQ3 aimed to investigate the impact of inclusivity on trust and engagement in the workplace. The participants' responses highlighted three themes: trust empowerment is relational to the interactive exchanges between employees within the working environment, the effectiveness of inclusivity hinges on the collective support from the workforce, and intentional inclusion can inadvertently reflect exclusion. The findings on inclusivity are consistent with prior studies by Dawson et al. (2024) and Bernstein et al. (2020), where both indicates that inclusivity is cultivated through active participation from both leaders and employees. Inclusivity is not achieved solely through broad policies or annual recognition events; instead, it requires

consistent, intentional actions from leaders and workforce members alike. The participants highlighted the importance of equitable access to communication, information, and advancement opportunities. When information about opportunities are not uniformly communicated or when advancement are perceived as limited to a select few, morale and engagement suffer. When inclusivity occurs authentically, it empowers employees, strengthens trust, and supports greater engagement. It is enforced by this study that inclusivity is possible when there is joint ownership between leaders and employees.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study's recommendations align with the analysis of engagement and trust in the leader and employee relationship and their implications for inclusivity. An insightful understanding into the extent to how work engagement and trust between leader and non-leader employees' influences inclusivity, offered opportunities to improve recruitment, engagement, and retention of a diverse workforce and positively fostering an inclusivity perception of the working environment (To et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024), and a more cohesive and effective working environment, ultimately enhancing organizational overall performance and bridging the gap between expectations of EDI and the actual experiences of both leadership and employees. Trust does not look the same in every leader-member relationship; each dynamic is shaped by the individuals involved, their histories, and the context in which they interact (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Buengeler et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023). For example, some leaders may foster trust through open communication and consistent support, while others may build it through empowering team members or demonstrating reliability in decision-making. Recognizing the uniqueness of each relationship allows organizations to tailor their approaches to trust-building, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all solutions. Kahn (1990) and Mayer et al (1995) both

outlined the establishment of trust as relational to the contents of the environment. This study highlights supporting leaders and members through mechanisms such as mentorship programs and peer-to-peer recognition initiatives can help build connections that transcend formal groups and hierarchies. As these bonds of trust evolve, they contribute to a more engaged and cohesive workforce, where employees feel valued and motivated to contribute to organizational goals.

Prior studies have highlighted that even well-intentioned efforts to promote inclusion can inadvertently lead to exclusion (Adamson et al., 2021; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2018). For instance, initiatives designed to support one group may unintentionally overlook or marginalize others. It is crucial for organizations to remain vigilant, continuously assessing the impact of their inclusion strategies to ensure that no group is left behind. Organizations must take proactive steps to identify and dismantle implicit biases and structural barriers that hinder true inclusion. This involves actively listening to the experiences of both employees and leaders, gathering feedback, and being willing to adapt policies and practices. Regularly seeking and acting on feedback from employees supports organizational health and empowers individuals. When organizations demonstrate that they value input and are willing to make changes, it fosters a culture of trust and continuous improvement. This responsiveness not only addresses current challenges but also anticipates future needs, keeping the organization agile and resilient. Proactively integrating trust, equity, and inclusion into everyday actions and decisions creates a more engaged, resilient, and high-performing workforce. This means moving beyond one-off initiatives to make these values a core part of organizational culture reflected in how teams collaborate, how leaders make decisions, and how success is defined and rewarded. These practices can support organizational health and the

fostering of more equitable environment empowering individuals to contribute their best selves to collective success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The research questions and the five identified themes from this study showed that perceptions of fairness directly impacted engagement between leader and employee in the promoting an authentic working environment. Trust reinforces a sense of psychological safety, which is critical for authentic engagement. The findings highlight the interdependence of trust, equity, and inclusion in driving authentic engagement. When leaders and employees practice inclusivity authentically and together, they empower employees, strengthens trust, and support greater engagement. In the pursuit of expanding the literature on social exchange theory (SET) through the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship dynamics, future researchers should consider how the themes of inclusion, trust, and engagement manifest in various industries, particularly those outside healthcare. Future research should investigate how the themes of inclusion, trust, and engagement manifest in a variety of industries, particularly those outside the healthcare sector. This broader approach would help uncover contextual factors such as organizational culture, industry norms, and operational structures that influence the effectiveness of inclusive practices. With the increasing prevalence of remote and hybrid work, it is especially important to examine how these arrangements impact the development of trust, perceptions of inclusion, and the dynamics of leader-member exchange. For example, remote work may alter the frequency and quality of interpersonal exchanges, potentially affecting how employees experience inclusion and build trust with leaders and peers. Understanding these nuances can inform more adaptable and effective EDI strategies across diverse organizational settings.

While the current research yielded valuable insights from a targeted population, future studies should aim for broader sampling that includes participants from a wide range of demographic backgrounds and intersectional identities. Expanding the participant pool will deepen our understanding of how inclusion and exclusion are experienced differently across various groups, such as those defined by ethnicity, gender, age, or professional role. This is particularly important because the present study's small, localized sample (twelve participants) limits the generalizability of its findings. By incorporating more diverse perspectives, future research can better capture the complexity of workplace inclusion and identify strategies that are effective for a wider range of employees. Although this study utilized qualitative methods to explore lived experiences, future research should incorporate quantitative approaches to measure the effectiveness of ongoing efforts such as communication initiatives, policy changes, and training interventions aimed at fostering inclusion, trust, and employee engagement. Quantitative data can provide objective metrics on outcomes like job satisfaction, retention, and organizational performance over time. This mixed-methods approach would allow researchers to assess not only the subjective experiences of employees but also the tangible impact of EDI strategies, offering a more comprehensive evaluation of what works in practice.

Investigating how different leadership styles affect employees' perceptions of inclusion, trust, and engagement could yield actionable insights for leadership development programs. Since leader-member exchange dynamics are shaped by the behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal skills of leaders, understanding which styles are most conducive to fostering an inclusive environment is crucial. For instance, transformational, servant, or participative leadership may have varying effects on trust-building and engagement. Research in this area can guide organizations in training and selecting leaders who are best equipped to support evolving

interpersonal relationships and trust dynamics within diverse teams. Further research should analyze how organizational hierarchies, policies, and the distribution of resources influence employees' ability to contribute, feel recognized, and build trust within teams. Structural factors such as decision-making authority, access to information, and opportunities for advancement can either facilitate or hinder inclusion and engagement. By examining these elements, future studies can illuminate the complex interplay between organizational systems and individual experiences, ultimately guiding the development of more equitable and supportive workplace practices. Addressing these areas will help organizations identify and remove barriers to inclusion, ensuring equity opportunity for all employees to thrive.

### **Study Summary**

While prior studies with varying theoretical concepts focusing on relationship and practices aimed at diversity and inclusion exist (Jamshid et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022; Turner & Merriman, 2022), there have been lacking insights into workplace inclusivity through employee work engagement, and trust between mid-level leaders and employees. This study builds upon previous research, where employees continue to believe that inclusivity is not equally experienced in their work environment (Batmomolin et al., 2022; Rezai et al., 2023). Such conflicting perceptions within the organization can hinder positive outcomes in staff development, recruitment, engagement, and employee retention, and ultimately impacting the overall performance of the organization (Sweeting, 2023; Ward-Bartlett et al., 2023). The findings in this study emphasize that trust forms the foundation for psychological safety, which in turn drives employee motivation and authentic participation in the workplace, shaping organizational structures and individual experiences to foster a truly inclusive work environment. By focusing on the relationships and exchanges between leaders and employees, it offers actionable insights

for improving recruitment, engagement, retention, and overall organizational effectiveness. The research demonstrates that inclusion and trust are deeply interconnected, requiring ongoing attention and adaptation rather than one-off initiatives.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts can sometimes unintentionally lead to exclusion (Adamson et al., 2021; Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Shore & Chung, 2023; Tang et al., 2022; Wang & Li, 2018). It encourages organizations to proactively identify and address implicit biases and structural barriers through regular dialogue and feedback. In essence, the study highlights that fostering inclusion, trust, and engagement is an ongoing journey, essential for organizational health, employee satisfaction, and the achievement of a thriving and resilient workforce, thereby bridging the gap between EDI expectations and lived experiences.

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## Appendix A

### Research Study Summary

<b>Problem Statement</b>		
The misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees.		
<b>Purpose</b>		
To better understand what contributes to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment in the Metro area of New York and New Jersey of the United States.		
<b>Research Questions</b>		
<i><b>RQ1</b></i>	<i><b>RQ2</b></i>	<i><b>RQ3</b></i>
What role do work engagement between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic working environment?	What role do trust between leader and employee play in fostering an authentic working environment?	How do inclusivity influence trust and engagement in the working environment?
<b>Interview Questions</b>		
<i><b>IQ1</b></i>	<i><b>IQ2</b></i>	<i><b>IQ3</b></i>
Can you share a recent work collaboration that made you felt particularly engaged and connected to the organization mission? <b>Ref:</b> Liu et al, (2022) highlighted employees feel connected via the access to contribute and participate in processes and decision making.	How do you and your team members support each other at work?  <b>Ref:</b> Dawson et al., (2024) in their studies identified that inclusion is very action oriented involving elements for the creation of an inclusive supportive working environment.	Can you share what actions leaders and members are demonstrating to foster a more engaging and trusting work environment? <b>Ref:</b> Inclusion and exclusion are action oriented, (Dawson et al.,2024; Shore & Chung, 2023)
Can you share about an instance where you felt your inputs were not valued or impactful? How did it impact your work?	Can you share an encounter where you felt trust or mistrust at work? <b>Ref:</b>	Can you share one practice that could be improved to foster a more inclusive work environment? <b>Ref:</b>

<p><b>Ref:</b> (Dawson et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2023). Highlighted for employees, feeling inclusive must equate to feelings of acceptance and respect.</p>	<p>Cao &amp; Galinsky, (2020) highlights trust goes through continuous evaluation, as its influence is base on the inference from the context and social interactions within the environment.</p>	<p>The presence of inclusivity in working relationships is a needed component of the live experiences of employee inclusion perception and felt belongingness, (Dawson et al., 2024; Rezai et al., 2023).</p>
	<p>How do you know when your team members are being transparent with you at work? <b>Ref:</b> Shore &amp; Chung, (2023) highlighted that leaders interactive exchanges may or may not match the intentions of organizational EDI goals for a more inclusive working environment.</p>	

## Appendix B

### Contents of the Recruitment Email

My name is Uilita Simpson-Cave, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I also hold a role as Senior Administrative Assistant in the department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (DPLM) at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about what contributes to the misalignment of organizational Equity, Diversity, and Inclusive desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. The name of this research is "The Role Of Engagement And Trust In The Organization Diversity, Equity And Inclusion Practices".

The purpose of the research is to better understand what contributes to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment.

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. There are no gender restrictions imposed.
2. Functions in one of sub-departmental components of the DPLM.
3. Mid-level leader (supervisor/manager) or non-leader employee,
4. Clinical or non-clinical employee.
5. Minimum of two years employment with the organization,
6. Must be 18years and older.

I hope to include 12 people in this research.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please review the attached document and respond to this email **U.Simpson-Cave8648@o365.ncu.edu** no later than 1 week effective from today's date to schedule a virtual one on one interview that is of mutual convenience.

Thank you for your time and attention.

## Appendix C

### Consent Form

My name is Ulita Simpson-Cave, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I also hold a role as Senior Administrative Assistant in the department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (DPLM) at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about what contributes to the misalignment of organizational Equity, Diversity, and Inclusive desired expectations and those of leadership and employees. The name of this research is "The Role Of Engagement And Trust In The Organization Diversity, Equity And Inclusion Practices".

The purpose of the research is to better understand what contributes to the misalignment of organizational EDI's desired expectations and those of leadership and employees in a healthcare environment.

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. There are no gender restrictions imposed.
2. Functions in one of sub-departmental components of the DPLM.
3. Mid-level leader (supervisor/manager) or non-leader employee,
4. Clinical or non-clinical employee.
5. Minimum of two years employment with the organization,
6. Must be 18years and older.

I hope to include 12 people in this research.

**Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.**

**What you will be asked to do:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Virtual consent process.
2. Virtual 1:1 person interview for 45-60 minutes via Teams or Zoom.
3. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes.
4. Follow-up interview for 15-30 minutes (if needed) to clarify any discrepancies.

During these activities, you will be asked the following questions:

1. Can you share a recent work collaboration that made you felt particularly engaged and connected to the orgabization mission?
2. Can you share about an instance where you felt your inputs were not valued or impactful? How did it impact your work?
3. How do you and your team members support each other at work?
4. Can you share an encounter where you felt trust or mistrust at work?
5. How do you know when your team members are being transparent with you at work?

6. Can you share what actions leaders and members are demonstrating to foster a more engaging and trusting work environment?
7. Can you share one practice that can be improved to foster a more inclusive work environment?

**Risks:** There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can still skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time.

**Benefits:** If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

**Recording:** I would like to audio and/or video record your responses and/or actions with Teams or Zoom during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

**Confidentiality:** No personal identifiers are required for this study. I will keep records of this study private. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will securely store your data for 3 years. After which, I will delete electronic data and destroy paper data. A copy of the results will be shared with the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine (DPLM).

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

**If you have questions:** Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at U.Simpson-Cave8648@o365.ncu.edu or at 347-536-7998.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu)

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Your Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Pre-Screening Protocol**

#### **Preparation**

Once participants email indication of interest to participate, they will be assessed to ensure they meet all the study criteria listed in both the recruitment email and consent form, as selection of participants is key to capturing the right data for the research questions.

#### **Introduction**

A follow-up pre-screening email will be sent asking” Please highlight YES or NO that you meet all the required research criteria below?”

1. There is no gender restrictions imposed.
2. Functions in one of sub-departmental components of the DPLM.
3. Mid-level leader (supervisor/manager) or non-leader employee,
4. Clinical or non-clinical employee.
5. Minimum of two years employment with the organization,
6. Must be 18years and older.

#### **Conclusion**

**YES!**

Thank you for indicating your interest to participate in the study. I am pleased to inform you that you have successfully completed the screening process to participate in this study. Please indicate a date and time that is most suitable to schedule a virtual interview session.

**NO!**

Thank you for indicating your interest to participate in the study. I regret to inform you that you do not meet all the criteria to participate in this study.