"Follow the leader": how inclusive leaders inspire followers to perform well through strengths use

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Abstract

Purpose – While previous research in career studies has highlighted the positive impact of several leadership behaviors on followers' work and career success, less is known about how the emergent topic of inclusive leadership shapes followers' task performance. Using an inclusive leadership approach and job demands-resources theory, we developed a novel sequential mediation model in which inclusive leadership indirectly

facilitates followers' performance through self-initiating behavior and work motivation. Specifically, we aimed to investigate whether inclusive leaders encourage followers to show enhanced task performance through strengths use and work engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – A representative sample of 278 Dutch employees from diverse organizations was surveyed at three different time points.

Findings – The results of structural equation modeling evidenced that inclusive leadership was indirectly related to follower task performance, initially through the utilization of strengths and subsequently through work engagement over time. When leaders exhibited behaviors that were inclusive in nature, they encouraged their followers to make use of their strengths at work. Such leadership actions boosted the work engagement of their followers and led to enhanced task performance.

Originality/value – We develop and test a novel sequential mediation model that explores how inclusive leadership fosters improved task performance among followers by promoting the utilization of strengths and subsequent work engagement. This sheds light on the mechanisms through which inclusive leadership contributes to follower performance, a crucial indicator in shaping sustainable career trajectories.

Keywords Inclusive leadership, Strengths use, Work engagement, Task performance, Work motivation

Paper type Research paper

The capacity to influence and inspire followers is the essence of leadership and continues to be a central point of interest for scholars and practitioners alike. Specifically, leadership plays a key role in an employee's career (Clark and Harrison, 2018) and its sustainability (Fang *et al.*, 2021), not least by contributing to the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs at work (i.e. autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Hetland *et al.*, 2011) (cf. De Vos *et al.*, 2020). So far, substantial research has shown that a wide range of leadership styles and behaviors impact followers' work and career attitudes and outcomes (e.g. Litano and Major, 2016). For instance, Vincent-Höper *et al.* (2012), in their work on the predictive value of transformational leadership for career-related outcomes, found that this style contributes to work engagement and subjective occupational success for both men and women. In a similar vein, empowering leadership appeared to be positively related to followers' subsequent psychological empowerment, which, in turn, enhanced protean career attitudes and career commitment (Kim and Beehr, 2017). Earlier work in this field has also shown the positive effects of servant leadership (Wang *et al.*, 2019) and authentic leadership (Chughtai, 2018) on employee career success.

One recent leadership concept that still lacks integration with the career literature (Fang *et al.*, 2021) is inclusive leadership, which has become increasingly important as organizations strive to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2022). Inclusive leadership emphasizes the leadership behaviors that encourage employees to participate in decision-making and problem-solving, striving to create an environment where all employees feel respected, valued, and heard (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006).

Building on the social exchange perspective (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), previous research has already revealed that followers who work with inclusive leaders are indeed more innovative (Guo *et al.*, 2022), creative (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2020), and perform better (Huang *et al.*, 2010). Despite the recognized significance of inclusive leadership in the workplace, as emphasized by Shore *et al.* (2011), up until now there is still a gap in research regarding the mechanism that links inclusive leadership to follower task performance. While some studies suggested that psychological empowerment (Siyal *et al.*, 2023), resilience capacity (Gong *et al.*, 2024), and psychological safety (Hassan and Jiang, 2021) serve as mechanisms explaining the link between inclusive leadership and task performance, less is known about how emergent behavioral mechanisms (i.e. strengths use and work engagement) elucidate this relationship.

The concept of character strengths is defined as the attributes that enable individuals to excel or perform optimally (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Wood *et al.*, 2011). In alignment

with recent positive psychology theories, prior empirical research suggests that when individuals use their strengths at work, they perform better as strengths use brings about work engagement (e.g. Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b), which refers to a motivational state where individuals feel vigorous, enthusiastic, and, immersed in their work activities (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2023). According to job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), employee well-being and job performance hinge on two key job characteristics: job demands (e.g. workload), which contribute to stress and indirectly impede performance, and job resources (e.g. social support), which foster motivation and indirectly enhance performance. The JD-R theory is based on two underlying psychological processes that play a role in the development of stress versus motivation. The first one comprises a so-called health impairment process, wherein high job demands exhaust employees' mental and physical resources, potentially leading to health problems. The second underlying process is motivational in nature and comprises that job resources have either intrinsic (because they foster growth, learning, and development) or extrinsic (because they are instrumental in achieving work goals) motivational potential, and lead to positive work outcomes, such as work engagement and high job performance (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b).

Although the initial JD-R theorizing focused on the work environment's impact on well-being, the recent iteration of the theoretical framing (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) highlights that individuals foster job resources through self-initiating behavior (i.e. strengths use, job crafting, and self-management). These resources can be functional in tackling job demands and will eventually lead to higher work engagement and enhanced performance. Our emphasis on two behavioral mechanisms, namely strengths use and work engagement, stems from the proposition that strengths use is proposed as one of the self-initiating behaviors (Bakker, 2017). Earlier research showed that when it is cultivated through environmental factors, it leads to desirable work outcomes through work engagement (Meyers *et al.*, 2020; Van Wingerden and Van der Stoep, 2018).

In particular, employing a three-wave time-lagged survey, the present study investigates whether inclusive leaders encourage followers to show enhanced task performance through strengths use and work engagement, being possible mediators in this relationship. Our rationale for choosing the JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) as our underlying framework and linking it with an inclusive leadership approach lies in its capacity to offer a comprehensive ground for understanding the dynamics between various resources (e.g. leadership support, autonomy, feedback), individual behaviors, and performance outcomes. We argue that when leaders foster an inclusive environment where followers feel secure, included, heard, and valued, their followers are more inclined to identify and capitalize on their strengths and abilities (i.e. strengths use) to unleash their potential. Such proactive behavior, in turn, may boost follower work engagement. In other words, when followers make the best use of their strengths, they are better prepared to focus on what they are good at and how they can do well in accomplishing their work goals (Wood *et al.*, 2011). As such, they might be more inclined to be engaged and show enhanced task performance (Miglianico *et al.*, 2020). Building on this notion and linking JD-R theory with an inclusive leadership approach, we have developed a research model depicting the possible mediating mechanisms through which inclusive leadership might facilitate follower performance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Proposed conceptual model of inclusive leadership and follower task performance

Source(s): Authors' work

This study provides three distinctive contributions to the literature on leadership, strengths use, and work engagement. First, we advance the inclusive leadership literature by investigating the underlying mechanisms through which inclusive leadership facilitates follower task performance. We propose that leaders who show inclusive behaviors such as empowerment, openness, respect, and recognition stimulate followers to identify and use their strengths, which, subsequently, will lead them to be engaged and show higher task performance. By focusing on both self-initiating behavior - namely strengths use (Bakker and Van Woerkom, 2018), being an individual employee factor - and inclusive leadership, being a contextual factor, we highlight the proactive role of subordinates in the leadership-performance process, herewith endorsing the premise of shared responsibility from both parties (i.e. leaders and their employees) for sustained performance at the contemporary workplace (Clarke and Patrickson, 2008; Van der Heijden, 2005).

Second, we contribute to JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) by positioning leadership in this theoretical framework (Tummers and Bakker, 2021), being a subdomain of JD-R research that needs more clarification. In particular, some researchers consider that leadership directly influences job resources and demands (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016), others connect it directly to employee proactive behaviors (i.e. job crafting, Thun and Bakker, 2018), while yet others see leadership as a moderator between job resources and employee motivation (Caniëls *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we test the proposed link between inclusive leadership and performance using a specific chain (i.e. leadership → strengths use → work engagement → task performance).

Third, we add to the character strengths literature (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) by offering an unprecedented predictor of proactive work behavior of strengths use. Earlier studies have usually investigated the potential outcomes of strengths use, such as well-being (Keenan and Mostert, 2013), self-esteem (Wood *et al.*, 2011), and performance (Van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015). In this scholarly work, we suggest inclusive leadership as a new antecedent, herewith adding to the existing knowledge in this field.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

The JD-R theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate dynamics between employee well-being and performance in the workplace (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). While acknowledging the impact of job demands, such as workload, on employee stress levels, JD-R theory equally underscores the pivotal role of job resources in fostering motivation and enhancing performance. Specifically emphasizing the motivational pathway, JD-R theory highlights how job and personal resources contribute to positive work outcomes by fulfilling employees' psychological needs for growth and development (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). In a recent refinement of JD-R theory, attention is directed towards individuals' active role in nurturing job resources through self-initiating behaviors such as strengths use (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). The inclusive leadership approach is distinguished by its emphasis on openness, accessibility, and the active encouragement of diversity and individual contributions within a team (Randel *et al.*, 2018). It prioritizes fostering employee development and growth, thereby offering continuous support to employees (Lu *et al.*, 2023). By integrating the principles of the inclusive leadership approach with JD-R theory, the present study suggests that inclusive leadership cultivates an environment conducive to such self-initiating behaviors. Under inclusive leadership, employees are empowered to leverage their strengths, thus cultivating job resources. Consequently, these resources enhance work engagement, resulting in improved task performance. Therefore, we posit that inclusive leadership indirectly enhances follower task performance through a sequential process involving strengths use and work engagement.

Inclusive leadership

Although the phenomenon of inclusive leadership has gained increasing popularity among researchers, it still suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity. Initially, the focus was on the recognition of followers' contributions (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). Later on, this focus has expanded to the relational leadership perspective and denoted inclusive leadership as "leaders who exhibit openness, accessibility, and availability in their interactions with followers" (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010, p. 250). Subsequently, the focus on inclusive leadership has shifted to highlight the leadership behaviors characterized by "supporting group members, ensuring justice and equity, and providing shared decision-making" (Randel *et al.*, 2018, p. 193). Synthesizing all these definitions, inclusive leaders emphasize three key leadership behaviors: (1) Recognizing subordinates' unique qualities and contributions of subordinates; (2) being open and accessible to guarantee that all voices and fresh ideas are heard and esteemed; and (3) involving followers in the decision-making process. Therefore, inclusive leadership, being distinct from other positive leadership styles such as charismatic, transformational, and servant leadership, prioritizes diversity, equity, and active participation in decision-making. While charismatic leadership relies on personal charm (Antonakis *et al.*, 2016), transformational leadership focuses on change and personal growth (Bass and Riggio, 2006), and servant leadership emphasizes serving follower needs (Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), inclusive leadership creates an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and respected for enhanced performance (Fang *et al.*, 2021; Hollander, 2009; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006; Veli Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). We argue that the inclusivity that is inherent to an inclusive leadership style may have unique implications for how followers identify and capitalize on their strengths, subsequently impacting their work engagement and task performance. This is because such leadership behaviors involve actively valuing diverse perspectives, appreciating the individuality of each follower, and providing tailored support to stimulate followers to recognize and utilize their unique strengths effectively.

Earlier research showed that leaders who engage in such forms of inclusive leadership behaviors have the ability to influence followers to feel motivated (Bao *et al.*, 2022), show innovative behavior (Guo *et al.*, 2022) and creativity (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we contend that inclusive leadership comprises a variety of leadership behaviors that might foster a resourceful environment where followers feel engaged and perform well.

Inclusive leadership and strengths use

The concept of strengths use is based on the idea that every individual has unique strengths and abilities that can be identified and used to achieve optimal functioning at work (Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2022; Wood *et al.*, 2011). It is different from traditional approaches to performance management, which are often focused on identifying and improving weaknesses (Biswas-Diener *et al.*, 2011). The notion of a character strength (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), which has received an increasing scholarly interest within the positive psychology movement (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is defined as the ability to think, feel, and act in a way that allows one to reach optimal performance when pursuing desired outcomes (Linley, 2008). Examples of such character strengths comprise curiosity, teamwork, humor, and compassion. When individuals employ their strengths in the workplace, they tend to perform at their best, experience more positive states such as feeling competent and thriving, and have a deeper sense of meaning and authenticity (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Therefore, employee strengths use has been associated with greater work engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2019) and enhanced task performance (Harzer and Ruch, 2013). Bakker and Van Woerkom (2018) unified strengths use with JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023;

Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) and posited that individuals enrich job (and personal) resources and cope with job demands when they identify and leverage their strengths.

There are various reasons why employees who may benefit from inclusive leadership are inclined to utilize their strengths more frequently in the workplace. First, when leaders show inclusive behaviors, they recognize and value their subordinates' unique qualities and skills. Those behaviors can help followers identify their strengths to reach their fullest potential (Wood *et al.*, 2011). Second, inclusive leaders establish a conducive atmosphere in which followers feel secure in sharing their opinions and ideas, which inspires them to bring their unique strengths, skills, and knowledge to the table. In doing so, they make valuable contributions to the achievement of organizational objectives. Such an open and inclusive culture stimulates self-disclosure of strengths among team members, enabling them to identify and utilize these strengths effectively, ultimately enhancing (team) performance. In contrast, when subordinates feel unheard by their supervisor, are excluded from decision-making processes, and do not receive recognition and appreciation from their leaders, they are less likely to experience an open atmosphere, herewith making it unlikely that they express their unique qualities (Hollander, 2009). Consequently, the absence of inclusive leadership may prevent followers from effectively utilizing their strengths in the workplace.

Third, by involving followers in decision-making, inclusive leaders create a resourceful environment that fosters a sense of ownership and empowers followers to use their strong points and be at their personal best (Tummers and Bakker, 2021). In line with this reasoning, previous cross-sectional research using a Dutch sample found that inclusive leadership of individuals was positively related to employee's strengths use (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2022).

In the current study, we investigate this relationship over time, and we integrate JD-R theorizing with conservation of resources (COR) theorizing (Hobfoll, 1989). We build on the resource caravan principle (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) from the COR theory to explain the beneficial role of inclusive leadership in stimulating one's followers to unleash their full potential at the workplace. Our idea aligns with the recommendation made by Kwon and Kim (2020), who advocated for further research that incorporates relevant theoretical frameworks to illustrate the operant psychological forces explaining employee behaviors, and to provide a motivational context for the relationships between model variables. This resource caravan principle states that resource gains comprise a pattern in which resources are associated with other resources, thereby creating so-called resource caravans (e.g. Westman *et al.*, 2004). We assume that working with inclusive leaders will put followers in a positive resource-accumulation loop whereby prior resources (i.e. inclusive leadership behaviors) enable followers to acquire further resources (i.e. the use of strengths) over time (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, we put forth the ensuing hypothesis:

H1. Inclusive leadership exhibits a positive relationship with employee strengths use over time.

Inclusive leadership, strengths use, and work engagement

Work engagement refers to a psychological state in which individuals are highly involved in their work, and experience positive emotions such as vigor, enthusiasm (i.e. feeling dedicated, and immersion (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2023). Engaged workers are intrinsically motivated, exerting effort because they find their work enjoyable and rewarding (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2023b). As an employee's work engagement can be triggered by strengths use (Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b), it is plausible to expect that when employees use their personal best, they are more likely to feel engaged (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2023a; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2023). Additionally, when followers are afforded to utilize their strengths, they are more prone to feel valued, as their abilities are being recognized and utilized. This may lead to increased

intrinsic motivation, as followers feel a sense of purpose and meaning in their work (Kahn, 1990). In line with this premise, earlier studies reported that strengths use was indeed associated with enhanced work engagement (e.g. Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b).

Building on the previous research evidence (e.g. Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b) and the above assertion for the direct relationships between inclusive leadership and strengths use, we argue that the psychological mechanism between inclusive leadership and work engagement may be elucidated by employee strengths use (cf. Stander *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, inclusive leadership behaviors such as recognizing subordinates' unique qualities, being open to new ideas, and including subordinates in the decision-making process will cultivate a resourceful environment that motivates followers to use their strengths at work. In turn, using one's strengths will result in enhanced work engagement (Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b) because allowing followers to perform at their best brings about a feeling of energy, dedication, and absorption in one's work (Bakker and Van Woerkom, 2018).

While other positive leadership styles (e.g. servant leadership) can foster a conducive work environment (e.g. servant leadership; Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), our emphasis on inclusive leadership arises from its unique focus on recognizing individual qualities, openness to new ideas, and inclusive decision-making. Inclusive leadership, aligned with the resource caravan principles (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), actively builds psychological, cognitive, and social resources, herewith motivating followers to unleash their full potential at work. For instance, acknowledging each subordinate's unique qualities fosters a culture of individual recognition and value, being an important basis for a resource-rich environment. In other words, an environment wherein one's competencies are acknowledged serves as a psychological resource, encouraging employees to deploy their strengths and enabling them to feel engaged. Therefore, we propose that:

H2. Inclusive leadership exhibits a positive relationship with work engagement via strengths use over time.

Inclusive leadership – performance link through strengths use and work engagement
Task performance is a key domain of individual performance and refers to how well an employee carries out their core tasks and responsibilities as framed in their job description (Borman and Motowidlo, 1997). It differs from contextual performance, which includes behaviors enhancing the work environment but not explicitly part of the job (Bergman *et al.*, 2008), and creative performance, which involves generating innovative ideas and solutions (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). Moreover, task performance serves as a critical indicator of sustainable career success, promoting future employability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). A recent meta-analytical study has shown that one of the most important drivers of task performance is employee work engagement (Neuber *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, employees who are happy at work are more productive and more likely to achieve better results than those who are not (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001). Additionally, engaged individuals tend to perform better than their less engaged counterparts because experiencing positive feelings such as joy, dedication, and immersion helps individuals broaden their thought-action repertoires (see the "broaden-and-build" theory; Fredrickson, 2001) to explore new ideas, persist in the face of challenges, and be creative in problem-solving (Fredrickson, 2013).

According to JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), work engagement is a crucial psychological mechanism in the positive association between job resources and employee performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). In addition, the latest theorizing building on the notion of the JD-R framework further postulates that workers also impact their work context through self-starting actions such as strengths use and job crafting (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). Integrating an inclusive leadership approach with JD-R theory and the resource caravan principle (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) from COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), as shown in Figure 1,

we posit that inclusive leadership exhibits a positive correlation with employee performance, initially through the utilization of strengths and subsequently through enhanced work engagement. This sequential mediation chain is reasonable because inclusive leaders encourage followers to use their strengths by creating a resourceful work environment that allows followers to perform at their best, which in turn, enthuses and energizes them to be more motivated (Bakker and Van Woerkom, 2018). Eventually, enhanced followers' work motivation (i.e. work engagement) will lead them to perform better because work engagement is a central antecedent of task performance (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Neuber *et al.*, 2022). In support of this line of reasoning, a previous study has already found that proactive behaviors (i.e. strengths use and personal initiative) together with work engagement mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and task performance (Bakker *et al.*, 2022). Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve exceptional results through a compelling vision (Bass and Riggio, 2006), while inclusive leadership centers around creating an inclusive environment that encourages collaboration, respect, and the contribution of followers (Randel *et al.*, 2018). Although these two leadership styles are distinct, both styles aim to motivate followers by creating a positive and supportive work environment that inspires them to feel valued and to be at their best. Therefore, we propose the following sequential mediation effect:

H3. Inclusive leadership exhibits a positive relationship with employee task performance, initially via strengths use and subsequently via work engagement over time.

Method

Sample and data collection procedure

Data was collected from Dutch workers at three different points in time with a lag of around two months between each wave. While there are no established guidelines for determining the ideal time intervals in organizational psychology research (Griep *et al.*, 2021), we chose a two-month time lag in line with recommendations for shorter intervals in time-lagged studies (Dormann and Griffin, 2015). Additionally, such a time lag strikes a balance by allowing adequate time between our assessments without excessively stretching the surveys, which could have led to participant attrition. Building on previous research that adopted a similar time frame (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2023a; Rudolph *et al.*, 2022), we assume that a two-month time lag would be appropriate to observe sequential fluctuations among the study variables.

Participants were approached via the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) panel administered by CentERdata Research Institute. In 2023, the LISS panel encompasses approximately 7,500 individuals of Dutch origin who were chosen as representative samples from the comprehensive database of Statistics Netherlands, employing a random sampling methodology (Scherpenzeel and Das, 2010). The panel members participate in a yearly survey that covers various topics. Further details on the LISS panel can be reached at www.lissdata.nl.

A Dutch university ethical review board approved the research protocol before data collection. Participants were provided with explicit assurance that their responses would only be employed for scientific purposes, that all answers would be kept confidential, and that involvement in the survey was entirely discretionary, and that they had the right to discontinue their involvement at any time.

In the first wave of the study (T1), a digital survey was distributed to an approximate sample size of 600 individuals selected through a randomized process from the LISS panel database, and 359 responses were obtained, resulting in a response rate of 59.83%. This survey included questions about the predictor variable (i.e. inclusive leadership) and the

demographics. In the follow-up wave (T2), a total of 305 usable responses were received from the T1 respondents, with a response rate of 84.95%. The survey for the second data collection wave contained items regarding the mediating variables (i.e. strengths use and work engagement). In the last data collection round (T3), a final questionnaire measuring the outcome variable (i.e. task performance) was administered to the T2 respondents. Out of the 305 respondents, 288 completed the questionnaire, which comprises a response rate of 94.42%. Excluding ten responses with incomplete task performance survey items, our final sample comprises 278 respondents. The LISS Panel ID numbers were used to link the three surveys together.

Respondents were predominantly male (53.6%) with a mean age of 46.83 years and an average organizational tenure of 13.15 years. Of the participants, 76% had a two-year college degree or above, 56.8% worked for a profit organization, and 90.3% had a fixed employment contract. No significant differences concerning gender, age, and main study variables, were found between individuals who participated in the survey during the initial phase (T1) and those who did not complete it in the later phase (T3).

Measures
Inclusive leadership. We assessed inclusive leadership at T1employing a set of nine items originally formulated by Carmeli *et al.* (2010). The participants provided their evaluations using a five-point rating scale (1 = *strongly disagree,* 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample items are: "My supervisor is open to hearing new ideas" and "My supervisor encourages me to access him/her on emerging issues". The inclusive leadership scale showed excellent internal consistency (ω = 0.94).

Strengths use. We rated employees' strengths use at T2 with a six-item scale devised by Van Woerkom *et al.* (2016a). Sample items include "I use my strengths at work" and "I organize my job to suit my strong points." The responses were collected on a seven-point scale (1 = *almost never,* 7 = *almost always*). The reliability of the strengths use scale was also very high (ω = 0.92).

Work engagement. We captured work engagement at T2 utilizing the brief version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which was originally developed by Schaufeli *et al.* (2019). Participants responded to three items that were rated on a five-point scale (1 = *never,* 5 = *very often*): "I am enthusiastic about my job", "At my work, I feel bursting with energy", and " I am immersed in my work". The scale achieved a good Omega score of 0.81.

Task performance. We evaluated participants' task performance at T3 with three items devised by. Participants rated their own task performance by responding to three items: Self-evaluation: "How would you assess your current overall task performance?"; Supervisor evaluation: "How would your direct supervisor evaluate your current overall task performance?", and Peer evaluation: "How would your colleagues assess your current overall task performance?". Items were scored on a five-point scale (1 = *very poor,* five = *excellent*). The task performance scale had a good internal consistency (ω = 0.87).

Controls. This study controlled for the variables of gender and age, as they have been found to influence work outcomes (Ng and Feldman, 2008; Sauermann and Cohen, 2010). Gender was operationalized as a binary variable, employing a dummy coding scheme where a value of 0 was assigned to males and a value of 1 was assigned to females. Age, on the other hand, was assessed in terms of yearly increments.

Strategy of analysis
The statistical analyses were conducted utilizing SPSS 28 and AMOS 28 software packages (Arbuckle, 2021). Prior to examining our research hypotheses, an initial step involved performing a sequence of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) with maximum likelihood

estimation. The purpose of these analyses was to assess the distinctiveness of the constructs by comparing the proposed measurement model to alternative models (Gürbüz, 2024).

Next, our research hypotheses were tested by employing structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent constructs. The fitness of the CFA and SEM models was assessed using several fit indices, including χ^2/df (degree of freedom), CFI (comparative fit index); SRMR (standardized root mean squared residual), and RMSEA (root-mean-squared error of approximation, Hu and Bentler, 1999). These models were considered acceptable if the χ^2/df was less than 5, CFI was above 0.90, and RMSEA and SRMR were less than 0.08, (Gürbüz, 2024; Kline, 2015). Finally, a bootstrap procedure with 5,000 times re-sampling was executed to test our mediation hypotheses. The utilization of this methodology is deemed more favorable in comparison to the conventional causal steps approach (Baron and Kenny, 1986) due to its inherent capability to mitigate the likelihood of type I and II errors (Igartua and Hayes, 2021), while circumventing the reliance on the assumption of a normal distribution within the sampled data (Preacher and Selig, 2012). The indirect effect was deemed significant when the 95th percentile bootstrap confidence interval (CI) was found to exclude zero (Hayes, 2022).

Results
Measurement validation
To confirm the discriminant validity of the measurement model, we contrasted the proposed four-factor model (comprising inclusive leadership, strengths use, work engagement, and task performance) to three alternative models: a three-factor model (combining strengths use and work engagement into one factor), a two-factor model (combining inclusive leadership, strengths use and work engagement) and a one-factor model (combining all items into one factor). We chose the three-factor model to identify any overlap between the variables measured at the same time, and the two-factor model to assess whether the outcome variable was distinct from the predictors. Lastly, the single-factor model was examined to detect a shared component present across all measured constructs. The results (see Supplementary material) showed that the hypothesized measurement model produced a better fit to the data (χ^2/df = 2.72; CFI = 0.92; SRMR = 0.05; RMSEA = 0.06) compared to the other competing CFA models, revealing that the constructs in the measurement model were distinct from one another. Moreover, the results indicated the single-factor model yielded a poor fit to the data (χ^2/df = 10.89; CFI = 0.53; SRMR = 0.16; RMSEA = 0.19;) and accounted for 36.88% of the variance, falling below threshold 50% (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024), herewith suggesting that the results of the present study are unlikely to be substantially affected by the presence of common method bias(CMB).

Descriptive statistics
Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations between inclusive leadership, strengths use, work engagement, and task performance.

Hypotheses testing
We performed a sequential mediation SEM analysis, while controlling for gender and age as covariates. The sequential mediation SEM yielded a good fit to the data (χ^2/df = 2.36; CFI = 0.93; SRMR = 0.05; RMSEA = 0.07). Table 2 shows its results, while Figure 2 displays the summary of path coefficients for the proposed research model.

The first hypothesis stated that inclusive leadership would be positively associated with employee strengths use over time. Table 2 shows that, as expected, T1 inclusive leadership significantly and positively predicted T2 strengths use (β = 0.42, p < 0.001), herewith

supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 postulated that inclusive leadership would be positively associated with work engagement through strengths use, being mediators, over time. We conducted bootstrapping procedures (5,000 times re-sampling) with 95% percentile confidence intervals to estimate the hypothesized indirect effect (Hayes, 2022). As anticipated, the bootstrap estimation results indicated that the indirect effect of T1 inclusive leadership on T2 work engagement ($\beta = 0.16$, 95% CI = 0.08, 0.25) through T2 strengths use was significant. This reveals that strengths use mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and work engagement, herewith providing support for Hypothesis 2. Our final hypothesis suggested that inclusive leadership would be positively associated with employee task performance, initially through strengths use and subsequently through work engagement over time. Computation of 95% bootstrap confidence intervals demonstrated that the anticipated sequential mediation from inclusive leadership to task performance via the utilization of strengths and work engagement was indeed positive and significant ($\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI = 0.03, 0.17). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was also supported with our data.

Additionally, to assess the appropriateness of our proposed sequential mediation model, we examined whether alternative structural models could more accurately account for the observed relationships in our data. Correspondingly, we developed three alternative models for comparison: Model 1 comprised a simple effect model that excluded the paths between

| Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. T1 Inclusive leadership	3.58	0.71	*0.94*				
2. T2 Strengths use	4.45	0.87	0.31**	*0.92*			
3. T2 Work engagement	3.65	0.67	0.30**	0.56**	*0.81*		
4. T3 Task performance	3.72	0.57	0.13*	0.33**	0.24**	*0.87*	
5. Gender	–	–	−0.13*	−0.05	0.16	−0.28**	–
6. Age	46.83	12.23	−0.12	0.14*	0.15**	0.13*	−0.03

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). SD = Standard deviation. Values in italics are alfa reliabilities
Source(s): Authors' work

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations, and Pearson r's correlations ($N = 278$)

Paths			Estimate	SE	t	p
Gender	=>	T3 Task performance	−0.17	0.06	−2.80	**
Age	=>	T3 Task performance	0.00	0.01	1.49	0.13
T1 Inclusive leadership	=>	T2 Strengths use	0.42	0.09	6.42	***
T2 Strengths use	=>	T2 Work engagement	0.38	0.05	5.09	***
T1 Inclusive leadership	=>	T2 Work engagement	0.17	0.07	2.40	*
T2 Work engagement	=>	T3 Task performance	0.27	0.06	3.61	***
T1 Inclusive leadership	=>	T3 Task performance	0.04	0.05	0.60	0.55

Indirect effects	Effect	Boot SE	p	95% Boot CI Lower	Upper
IL => SU => WE	0.16	0.04	***	0.08	0.25
IL => SU => WE => TP	0.09	0.04	**	0.03	0.17

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Standardized estimates were reported; SE = Standard error; CI = confidence interval (95% percentile obtained from 5,000 bootstrapping for the indirect effects); IL= Inclusive leadership; SU = Strengths use; WE = Work engagement; TP = Task performance
Source(s): Authors' work

Table 2.
Results of SEM analyses including direct and indirect effects ($N = 278$)
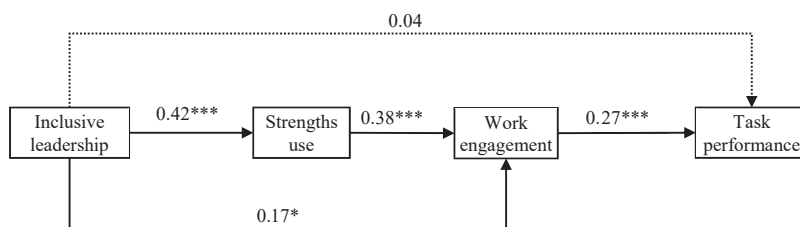
Indirect effects:

IL => SU => WE = 0.16, 95% CI [0.08, 0.25]

IL => SU => WE => TP = 0.09, 95% CI [0.03, 0.17]

Note(s): *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$. The dotted line represents a path that is not significant. Standardized estimates are reported. CI = 95 % percentile confidence interval obtained from 5,000 times bootstrapping re-sampling. Gender and age were controlled for but left out for simplicity. IL = Inclusive leadership, SU = Strengths use, WE = Work engagement, TP = Task performance
Source(s): Authors' work

Figure 2.
Summary results of the sequential meditation model of inclusive leadership and follower task performance

inclusive leadership and the mediating variables (strengths use and work engagement). Model 2 included only strengths use as a mediator, while Model 3 specified work engagement as the sole mediating variable. The results show that the proposed sequential mediation model produced a better fit to the data than Model 1 ($\chi^2(140) = 241.76$, $p < 0.01$), Model 2 ($\chi^2(55) = 116.82$, $p < 0.01$), and Model 3 ($\chi^2(103) = 179.28$, $p < 0.01$). Collectively, these results provided additional evidence in favor of our hypothesized model.

Discussion
The central point of inclusive leadership is to inspire followers by creating an inclusive and resourceful environment where they feel secure, included, heard, and valued (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Randel *et al.*, 2018). Integrating inclusive leadership approach (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006) with JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001), this study investigated whether inclusive leadership is positively related to followers' task performance over time, through strengths use and work engagement. The results of the current three-wave study among Dutch employees indicate that when leaders exhibit behaviors that are inclusive in nature, they indeed motivate their subordinates to identify and utilize their strengths at work. Such leadership behaviors, in turn, appear to boost followers' work motivation (i.e. work engagement) and improve their task performance.

Theoretical contributions
This study makes important contributions to the existing body of literature through various avenues. First, our study contributes to the literature on inclusive leadership by investigating a fundamental psychological mechanism that explains how inclusive leadership enhances the task performance of followers. We demonstrated that leaders who exhibit inclusive behaviors such as openness, availability, respect, and recognition encourage followers to use their strengths, which, in turn, lead followers to be engaged

and show enhanced task performance. These results speak directly to a key premise in the inclusive leadership literature (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Randel *et al.*, 2018), which proposes that when leaders show inclusive behaviors and build an inclusive environment, they can motivate their followers to put forth their best efforts. Our results are in line with previous research, which showed that inclusive leadership is associated with enhanced followers' strengths use (Gürbüz *et al.*, 2022), motivation (Bao *et al.*, 2022), innovative behaviors (Guo *et al.*, 2022), creativity (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Zhu *et al.*, 2020), and task performance (Huang *et al.*, 2010). However, the present study uniquely expands this previous research by pinpointing that inclusive leadership (1) fosters follower strengths use; (2) subsequently enhances work engagement through strengths use; and (3) indirectly contributes to follower task performance through strengths use and work engagement (sequential mediation) over longer periods. In other words, we broaden earlier scholarly work by illuminating how self-initiating behavior (i.e. strengths use) and work engagement act as an underlying mediating mechanism between inclusive leadership and task performance. These findings contribute to our understanding of why inclusive leadership inspires followers to perform well, providing scholars with a deeper comprehension of how inclusive behaviors foster task performance. Researchers can utilize these insights to refine existing models and theories, thereby advancing the field's understanding of leadership dynamics and their impact on individual and organizational outcomes.

Second, we contribute to JD-R theory (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001) by proposing and testing that inclusive leadership can be an essential job resource for enhancing follower well-being and task performance. Previous research has mainly investigated the predictive value of transformational leadership (Bakker *et al.*, 2022), LMX (Gutermann *et al.*, 2017), and servant leadership (Ortiz-Gómez *et al.*, 2022) using JD-R theorizing. By testing the link between inclusive leadership and performance using a specific chain (i.e. leadership → strengths use → work engagement → performance), we add to the body of knowledge connecting leadership to JD-R theory. In particular, we show that inclusive leadership can create a resourceful environment, which leads followers to use their strong points and be engaged, and subsequently to demonstrate enhanced performance.

Inclusive leadership stands distinctively apart from other leadership styles by prioritizing inclusivity as its core dimension, herewith fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated, and wherein individuals feel valued (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006). Unlike other positive leadership styles that may inspire change (transformational leadership, Bass and Riggio, 2006), emphasize personalized exchanges (LMX, Martin *et al.*, 2018), or provide resources (servant leadership, Van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), inclusive leadership stands out for its concentrated effort on inclusivity as the primary driver of desirable work outcomes. In particular, its emphasis on fostering belongingness while retaining individuality sets it apart from other leadership styles (Randel, 2023).

Moreover, although leadership is a crucial factor for follower motivation and performance, understanding how leadership is connected to JD-R theory is not straightforward so far, due to the flexibility of JD-R theorizing. According to some researchers, leadership directly influences job resources and demands (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016), while others incorporate it directly into employee proactive behaviors (i.e. job crafting, Thun and Bakker, 2018), and still, others see leadership as a moderator between the resources and employee motivation (Caniëls *et al.*, 2018). Considering these various ways of connecting leadership to JD-R theory, the results of our empirical work show that inclusive leadership appears to be incorporated into the JD-R framework as a job resource because working with inclusive leaders helps employees increase their job resources. This finding is in line with Chiniara and Bentein's (2016) study, which found that servant leadership fosters task performance by increasing job resources. Researchers can leverage these findings to broaden

their understanding of how leadership styles influence job resources and employee motivation within the JD-R framework.

Third, we contribute to the literature on the character of strengths literature by demonstrating that inclusive leadership is an important antecedent of strengths use. Earlier studies have usually investigated the potential outcomes of this type of proactive behavior such as well-being (Keenan and Mostert, 2013), self-esteem (Wood *et al.*, 2011), and performance (Van Woerkom and Meyers, 2015). Apart from Bakker *et al.*'s (2022) study that links transformational leadership to strengths use, there is a dearth of research on how specific leadership styles stimulate employee strengths use over time (Bakker and Van Woerkom, 2018). Our study findings demonstrate that leadership characterized by inclusivity might enthuse followers to identify and use their strengths. Specifically, inclusive leaders encourage their subordinates by establishing a conducive atmosphere that instills a sense of security to express their opinions and ideas, which inspires followers to use their strong points, skills, and knowledge to contribute to the success of the organization. These findings are also in line with the work by Gürbüz *et al.* (2022), who have found in a cross-sectional study that such leadership behaviors are positively related to the utilization of strengths. However, in the current empirical study, we provide novel evidence that the facilitation of inclusive leadership lasts for longer time periods as well. Researchers can use this insight to explore the mechanisms through which specific leadership styles, particularly inclusive leadership, stimulate employee strengths use over time, thereby enriching the character strengths literature.

Practical implications
This study holds various practical implications for managers in working organizations. First, managers who strive to encourage employees to use their strengths and aim to foster their work engagement and performance should focus on cultivating inclusive leadership skills through training. This approach is crucial given that task performance is a pivotal indicator of sustainable career success, encompassing both current job effectiveness and future employability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Aligning with calls for organizations to invest in inclusive leadership development call for organizations (Hollander, 2009), training programs should emphasize fostering a culture that values and utilizes employees' unique strengths. According to Kelloway *et al.* (2000), training plays a pivotal role in facilitating the learning process and absorbing essential leadership behaviors. Supporting this notion, Booysen (2013) underscores the effectiveness of practices such as mentoring and coaching in assisting leaders to cultivate an inclusive leadership style. To translate these insights into actionable measures, organizations can design specialized training programs and leadership development initiatives. Specifically, organizations should adopt the following measures within such programs: (1) Emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing the distinctive qualities of team members (Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b); (2) encourage leaders to be open and accessible, ensuring that every voice and fresh perspective is acknowledged and respected (Javed *et al.*, 2019); (3) promote the active involvement of followers in the decision-making process (Randel *et al.*, 2018); and (4) encourage leader to adopt a forward-looking approach when employees make mistakes, focusing on improvement rather than dwelling solely on past performance (Khan *et al.*, 2020). By incorporating these approaches into training programs, organizations can systematically empower their leaders to embrace inclusive leadership practices, thereby enhancing diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Shore *et al.*, 2011).

Second, our empirical work shows the mediating role of strengths use and work engagement in the leadership style-follower performance linkage. We therefore suggest that managers should stimulate employees to utilize their strengths at work. To achieve this, on

the one hand, organizations can configure HR practices (e.g. training and development, performance appraisal) based on a strength-based approach (Biswas-Diener *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, HR professionals and immediate supervisors can assist employees in recognizing and utilizing their strong points by making use of helpful tools such as the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and Strengths Finder 2.0 (Rath, 2007). By implementing these practices, organizations can improve employees' task performance and support their long-term career growth. This approach aligns with evolving human capital needs, ensuring sustained career success and adaptability in a dynamic work environment (Alavinia *et al.*, 2009).

Strengths, limitations, and suggestions for future research

This research has a key strength in that it surveyed a representative sample of Dutch working individuals. The sample was randomly drawn from the Statistics Netherlands registry through the LISS Panel (Scherpenzeel and Das, 2010) and included people from a variety of occupations. Additionally, by gathering time-lagged data at three different times, we were able to explore how inclusive leadership indirectly predicts follower performance over time.

However, this study has also certain restrictions. First, we measured all variables through self-reports, which may lead to worries that the results may be skewed due to CMB (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2024). Although we employed a three-wave lagged design to reduce this bias, it is recommended that future studies consider using multiple sources (e.g. immediate supervisors and subordinates) to measure at least employee task performance to gain more credible results. Besides, relational demography research (i.e. research incorporating the comparative demographic characteristics, such as age and gender, of dyads of leaders and their followers; Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989), may provide additional information about their attitudes and behaviors (see also Kim *et al.*, 2020), and therefore shed more light on the processes through which demography affects the impact of inclusive leadership on employee outcomes.

Second, since we have not taken into account any prior effects of study variables due to time-lagged data, we cannot determine the causal ordering of leadership → strengths use → work motivation → performance linkage. Additionally, the mediator variables (strengths use and work engagement) were measured at the same time period. This configuration of the variables means that it is not possible to determine which variable takes precedence. While our chosen ordering is consistent with prior studies (Bakker *et al.*, 2019; Van Woerkom *et al.*, 2016b) suggesting strengths use as a predictor of work engagement, it is worth noting that an alternative sequence, where inclusive leadership fosters engagement, subsequently empowering employees through their strengths to ultimately influence performance, could also be a plausible conceptualization (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, upcoming studies that employ more robust research designs (i.e. full panel design, experiment) may help us better understand the causal ordering of the variables.

Third, in our study, we have concentrated solely on investigating how inclusive leadership enhances follower performance through a sequential mechanism (i.e. strengths use and work engagement). Earlier studies showed that other employee proactive behaviors such as job crafting (Lichtenthaler and Fischbach, 2018), personal initiative (Bakker *et al.*, 2022), and playful work design (Scharp *et al.*, 2019) may act as an essential psychological mechanism between leadership and employee outcomes. Therefore, future research investigating whether inclusive leadership translates into follower job performance, through such employee self-initiating behaviors may advance our knowledge and expand the inclusive leadership literature.

Fourth, consistent with Clarke and Patrickson (2008), we advocate that more research is needed that does justice to the shared responsibility of both employer and employee for

protecting workers' employability. Therefore, we invite colleagues to adopt an interactionist perspective (Endler and Magnusson, 1976; Lewin, 1935) by incorporating the possible impact of appealing moderators (reflecting personal characteristics) in the linkage between inclusive leadership (being a contextual characteristic) and performance. In doing so, future research can address previous calls for a more comprehensive examination of the interplay between individuals and their surrounding context. This approach is necessary to avoid the fragmentation of empirical research within this field (see Cappelli and Sherer, 1991; De Vos et al., 2020; Mowday and Sutton, 1993). Qualitative research conducted among followers can also shed light on which linkages they bring to the table when discussing how inclusive leadership leads to better performance in their perception.

Fifth, our current study highlights individual-level implications of inclusive leadership, yet we would like to stress that group-level outcomes are crucial as well. Future research should explore group-level impacts, emphasizing the importance of cultivating both uniqueness and belongingness, as highlighted by Randel et al. (2018) and echoed in evolving research. This dual emphasis promises a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of inclusive leadership, offering practical insights for organizations aiming to enhance both individual and group effectiveness.

Finally, we evaluated inclusive leadership on an overall scale, which prevented us from exploring the relationships between certain aspects of inclusive leadership behaviors, on the one hand, and the motivation and performance of followers, on the other hand. Future research could delve deeper into distinct facets of inclusive leadership behaviors such as approachability (Edmondson, 2004), availability (Carmeli et al., 2010), recognition of followers' contributions (e.g. Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006), and involving followers in decision-making (e.g. Randel et al., 2018).

Conclusion
Our study has provided evidence of how inclusive leadership facilitates follower task performance by developing and testing a sequential mediation chain model. We demonstrate that when leaders exhibit inclusive leadership behaviors, they motivate their subordinates to identify and utilize their strengths at work. Such leadership behaviors subsequently stimulate followers' work engagement, which helps them to foster their performance because they can sense vigor, enthusiasm, and absorption (i.e. be more engaged) to perform well. We aspire that our research will inspire researchers to delve deeper into understanding how inclusive leadership can promote follower work outcomes through different psychological mechanisms.

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Supplementary material

Models	χ^2	df	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA		Comparisons $\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
1. Proposed four-factor model (IL + SU + WE + TP)	499.57*	183	0.92	0.05	0.06	–	–	–
2. Three-factor model (IL + SU and WE combined + TP)	734.81*	186	0.86	0.08	0.10	2 vs 1	235.24*	3
3. Two-factor model (IL, SU, and WE combined + TP)	1676.26*	188	0.63	0.13	0.17	3 vs 1	1176.69*	5
4. Single-factor model (all items were combined)	2059.57*	189	0.53	0.16	0.19	4 vs 1	1559.*	6

Note(s): *$p < 0.001$, *df* = degree of freedom, IL= Inclusive leadership, SU = Strengths use, WE = Work engagement, TP = Task performance, CFI = Comparative fit index, *SRMR* = Standardized root mean squared residual, RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation
Source(s): Authors' work

Table A1.
The results of the confirmatory factor analytical models ($N = 278$)

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