

Retoryka inkluzywności

Rhetoric of Inclusivity

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Inclusive leadership as a discursive-rhetorical practice: A conceptual framework of discourse, identity and power

Przywództwo inkluzywne jako praktyka dyskursywno-retoryczna: ramy koncepcyjne dyskursu, tożsamości i władzy

Abstract

Inclusive leadership is most commonly conceptualized as a behavioral style, psychological climate or managerial practice that promotes participation, belongingness and recognition. While these approaches have generated important insights, they provide only limited explanation of how inclusion is communicatively sustained within organizations. This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding inclusive leadership as a discursive-rhetorical practice of power. Drawing on a critical narrative synthesis of rhetorical theory, discourse studies and leadership scholarship, the article argues that inclusion is not a stable organizational condition, but a communicative accomplishment. The study proposes a three-dimensional framework composed of discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation that explains how rhetorical mechanisms (particularly *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*) shape the meanings of inclusion, legitimize organizational identities and regulate participation under different institutional conditions. By integrating classical rhetoric and contemporary leadership theory, the article contributes a more precise account of how inclusion is rhetorically enabled, constrained and contested.

Przywództwo inkluzywne jest najczęściej definiowane jako styl zachowania, klimat psychologiczny lub praktyka zarządzania, które promują partycypację, przynależność i uznanie. Choć te podejścia przyniosły istotne wnioski, nie wyjaśniają w pełni, w jaki sposób inkluzja jest podtrzymywana komunikacyjnie w organizacjach. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia ramy koncepcyjne dla zrozumienia przywództwa inkluzywnego jako dyskursywno-retorycznej praktyki władzy. Opierając się na krytycznej syntezie narracyjnej teorii retoryki, badań nad dyskursem i badań nad przywództwem, artykuł dowodzi, że inkluzja nie jest stabilnym stanem organizacyjnym, lecz osiągnięciem komunikacyjnym. Badanie proponuje trójwymiarową ramę złożoną z konstrukcji dyskursywnej, formowania tożsamości i mediacji władzy, która wyjaśnia, w jaki sposób mechanizmy retoryczne (w szczególności *logos*, *ethos* i *pathos*) kształtują znaczenie inkluzji, legitymizują tożsamości organizacyjne i regulują partycypację w różnych warunkach instytucjonalnych. Poprzez integrację klasycznej retoryki ze współczesną teorią przywództwa, artykuł proponuje bardziej precyzyjny opis tego, jak inkluzja jest retorycznie umożliwiana, ograniczana i kwestionowana.

Key words

inclusive leadership, rhetorical leadership, discourse, constitutive rhetoric, power
przywództwo inkluzywne, przywództwo retoryczne, dyskurs, retoryka konstytutywna, władza

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Inclusive leadership as a discursive-rhetorical practice: A conceptual framework of discourse, identity and power

1. Introduction

According to contemporary theoretical framings (Keyes 2004) we have entered the *post-truth era*, which was later interpreted as a *post-rhetorical era*. This suggests that traditional persuasive rhetoric is being replaced by misinformation and manipulation of the masses based on the polarization of public discourse and personal belief (Sismondo 2017). In accordance with these emerging cultural patterns of casual dishonesty and general loss of personal and institutional credibility, evidence-based discourse – such as logically and emotionally grounded, ethos-driven ways of persuasion – is replaced by live broadcast identity performance and narrative adherence in public debates and mediated communication practices. On the other hand, while mainstream research focuses on trends of exclusivity driving public opinion (in politics, culture, marketing and other prominent fields of the post-modern age), the need for transparency, credibility and inclusivity in the field of communication, has become stronger than ever. Therefore, it appears necessary to resolve the tension underlying the extreme approaches and divisive trends in order to restore the role of rhetoric and realign it with traditional values.

This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding inclusive leadership as a rhetorical-discursive practice of power. Unlike dominant approaches that conceptualize inclusive leadership as a behavioral style, organizational climate or psychological state, the present study argues that inclusion is constituted through communication. Drawing on a critical narrative synthesis of leadership, rhetorical and discourse scholarship, the article develops a three-dimensional framework composed of discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation.

These dimensions explain how inclusion is rhetorically produced, negotiated and contested within organizational contexts.

The article aims to provide a conceptual framework rather than a conventional literature review of inclusive leadership. Therefore, relevant literature is selected and synthesized according to its contribution to explaining and expanding the constitutive relationship between rhetoric, leadership, identity and inclusion. The proposed framework contributes to existing research in three ways. First, it reframes inclusion as a communicative accomplishment rather than a managerial outcome. Second, it explains how rhetorical mechanisms (particularly logos, ethos, and pathos) shape inclusion. Third, it specifies the institutional conditions under which inclusion becomes emancipatory, managerial, symbolic or manipulative. It theorizes the framework of inclusive rhetoric outlining the conceptions of linguistic approach and relevant leadership styles, arguing for the necessity and relevance of rhetorical literacy in leadership communication.

2. Inclusion as a discursive-rhetorical phenomenon

The concept of inclusion has become central to organizational scholarship, particularly within research on diversity, participation, and leadership. Most influential approaches conceptualize inclusion as a psychological state, organizational climate, or managerial outcome associated with belongingness, uniqueness, and participation (Kochan et al. 2003; Mor Barak 2015; Randel et al. 2018; Shore et al. 2011) rather than a rhetorical discursive practice. Early scholars of leadership and organizational communication have made important contributions by demonstrating that employees are more likely to contribute, innovate and engage when they experience recognition and acceptance within organizational settings (Carmeli et al. 2010; Hirak et al. 2012; Nembhard and Edmondson 2006; Randel et al. 2018; Simons et al. 2022). However, such approaches provide only limited explanations of how inclusion acquires meaning, legitimacy and practical significance within everyday organizational life.

This limitation is particularly important because inclusion does not arise independently of communication. Organizational actors do not simply experience inclusion; they interpret, negotiate, contest and construct it through discourse. Consequently, inclusion cannot be fully understood as a stable organizational condition or individual psychological state. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a communicative accomplishment emerging through ongoing processes of meaning-making, interpretation, and interaction (Thomas and Ely 1996). The paradigmatic shift from outcome-based toward discursive approaches represents one of the most important developments in contemporary inclusion research.

2.1 Inclusion as discursive construction

The discursive perspective challenges the assumption that organizational realities exist independently of language: rather than merely reflecting social reality, communication participates in its construction (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). From this perspective, inclusion is not simply implemented by organizations, but continuously produced through communicative practices that define belonging, legitimacy and participation. Early work by Thomas and Ely (1996) and Ely and Thomas (2001) demonstrates that diversity becomes organizationally meaningful only through interpretive frameworks that define how difference is understood and valued. Their contribution has shifted attention from demographic representation toward processes of interpretation and meaning construction. Similarly, Roberson (2006) argues that inclusion concerns the experience of belonging and value rather than simply the presence of diversity. Together, these studies suggest that inclusion depends less on objective conditions than on the discursive frameworks through which organizational actors understand themselves and others. Viewed from this perspective, inclusion becomes a rhetorical accomplishment. Narratives, metaphors, framing devices and symbolic representations shape how organization members interpret participation and belonging. Inclusion is therefore not merely experienced, but rhetorically constituted.

2.2 Inclusion, identity, and constitutive rhetoric

A discursive understanding of inclusion inevitably raises questions of identity. Organizations do not simply include individuals; they define who counts as a legitimate participant, what forms of participation are valued and which identities become institutionally recognized. This concern aligns closely with the tradition of constitutive rhetoric. White (1985) and later Charland (1987) argue that rhetoric does not merely persuade pre-existing audiences, but actively constitutes collective identities through communicative processes that define membership, legitimacy and belonging. Inclusion, therefore, involves more than access to organizational resources; it involves recognition within a collectively constituted social reality.

From this perspective, leadership plays a particularly important role, since through narratives, symbols and rhetorical appeals, it contributes to the construction of organizational identities and establish the boundaries of participation (Wasilewski and Kostrzewa 2025). Inclusion therefore depends not only on organizational policies, but also on the leader communicative practices through which identities are recognized and legitimized.

2.3 Inclusion and power

A further limitation of dominant inclusion frameworks lies in their tendency to treat inclusion as an inherently positive phenomenon. Critical approaches challenge this assumption by demonstrating that inclusion is inseparable from relations of *power*. Leadership discourse does not merely enable participation; it also shapes the conditions under which participation occurs. As Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) demonstrate, leaders influence organizational realities through framing processes that define problems, solutions and acceptable forms of action. Similarly, critical leadership scholarship emphasizes that communication may empower some actors while constraining others (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Collinson 2005).

Consequently, inclusion should be understood as a particular mode of power operation. Organizational actors may be invited to participate while remaining subject to normative expectations, institutional constraints and subtle forms of control. Rhetorical inclusion may therefore function as genuine empowerment, managerial coordination, symbolic recognition or even organizational control, depending on the conditions under which participation is structured (Cornelissen et al. 2008; Randel et al. 2018). Recognizing this tension is essential because it prevents inclusion from being treated as either inherently emancipatory or manipulative. Instead, inclusion must be examined as a rhetorical process operating at the intersection of discourse, identity and power.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that inclusion is best understood as a discursive-rhetorical phenomenon constituted through communicative practices that shape organizational meanings, identities, diversity and relations of power and hegemony (Kochan et al. 2003; Roberson 2006; Tourish and Hargie 2004). This insight provides the theoretical foundation for the remainder of the article where leadership itself is understood as a communicatively constituted process. By distinguishing discursive, linguistic, rhetorical and inclusive leadership, the next section develops the conceptual foundations necessary for the framework proposed later in the article.

3. From discursive leadership to inclusive leadership

The previous section established inclusion as a discursive, rhetorical, and power-laden phenomenon. The present section turns to communication-centered approaches to leadership in order to clarify how contemporary leadership scholarship conceptualizes the relationship between language, influence, identity and participation.

The preceding discussion suggests that inclusion cannot be adequately understood without examining the communicative processes through which organizational

realities, collective identities, and relations of power are constructed. At this point, leadership theory scholarship becomes particularly relevant. Although leadership and inclusion have often developed as separate fields of inquiry, a growing body of research demonstrates that leaders actively define the meaning of inclusion through discourse, framing, narrative construction and symbolic action (Antonakis and House 2014; Boekhorst 2014; Denis et al. 2010; Nguyen et al. 2024; Platania et al. 2025). Inclusion is therefore inseparable from the communicative processes through which participation, legitimacy and belonging are negotiated within organizations. This insight is reflected in several overlapping communication-centered approaches to leadership, including *discursive leadership*, *linguistic leadership*, *rhetorical leadership* and *inclusive leadership*. While these approaches share a common concern with communication, they address distinct analytical questions and collectively provide the theoretical foundations for the framework developed in this article.

At the broadest level, *discursive leadership* conceptualizes leadership as a communicatively constituted phenomenon. Rather than treating leadership as an individual attribute or formal position, discursive scholars argue that leadership emerges through interaction, collective interpretation and meaning negotiation (Denis et al. 2010; Fairhurst 2007). Leadership is therefore not merely communicated but constructed through discourse. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) argue, communication does not simply represent organizational reality, but actively participates in its production. Similarly, Wodak et al. (2011) demonstrate how leadership emerges through discursive practices that coordinate action and facilitate consensus. More recent studies reinforce this perspective: Murphy's (2023) linguistic ethnography illustrates how leadership is enacted through everyday conversational practices, while Denis et al. (2010) emphasize its distributed and emergent character in complex organizational environments. Discursive leadership explains how leadership becomes socially recognizable and legitimate emerging through communicative interaction, but provides less precision on the persuasive mechanisms through which influence is accomplished.

Building upon this foundation, *linguistic leadership* focuses on language as a mechanism of influence: It examines how leaders shape organizational realities through narratives, metaphors, framing devices and symbolic expressions. Leadership influence is therefore understood as inseparable from linguistic practice. This perspective is increasingly visible in contemporary research. Bleiklie et al. (2025) demonstrate that organizational transformation depends heavily on leaders' ability to construct persuasive narratives capable of guiding adaptation, while research on Leader Motivating Language (LML) highlights the strategic role of language in employee engagement and performance (Omair et al. 2025). Empirical

discourse studies further show how rhetorical choices shape leadership legitimacy, authority and public perception (Hamed and Alqurashi 2025; Hoang and Can 2025; Sartika et al. 2025). Nagaishi's (2025) work on metaphoric communication similarly illustrates how linguistic framing operates as an essential mechanism of organizational change. Linguistic leadership therefore identifies language as the primary mechanism of influence (mediating leadership effects), yet it does not fully explain why some communicative acts become persuasive while others fail.

The concept of rhetorical leadership narrows the focus further by examining persuasion as the defining mechanism of leadership influence. If discursive leadership explains how leadership emerges through communication and linguistic leadership explains how language functions as a mechanism of influence, rhetorical leadership explains how communication becomes persuasive. This tradition traces its foundations to Aristotle's conception of rhetoric as the ability to identify and deploy available means of persuasion (*Rhetoric* I.2 1355b). Classical rhetoric remains highly relevant because leadership inevitably involves influencing interpretations, judgments, and collective action. Contemporary scholarship extends this insight by emphasizing framing, storytelling, audience adaptation, and symbolic identification as central dimensions of leadership influence (Fairhurst and Sarr 1996; Fairhurst 2009; Grint 2005; Langford 2024). Rhetorical leadership therefore explains how leaders establish credibility, construct meaning, and mobilize commitment through persuasive communication, yet it remains primarily concerned with influence rather than inclusion.

While these approaches explain how leadership is communicatively constituted and how influence is achieved, inclusive leadership introduces an additional normative and political concern. Unlike discursive, linguistic or rhetorical leadership (which primarily explain communicative processes), inclusive leadership focuses on their consequences for participation, recognition, legitimacy, belongingness and voice. Research traditionally conceptualizes inclusive leadership as a behavioral style associated with psychological safety, belongingness, and uniqueness (Carmeli et al. 2010; Randel et al. 2018; Shore et al. 2011), and more recent studies highlight its positive effects on engagement, innovation and organizational performance (Nguyen et al. 2024; Platania et al. 2025). However, communication-centered approaches suggest that inclusion depends upon discursive accessibility, participation in meaning-making processes, and rhetorical recognition of organizational members (Stormer and McGreavy 2021; Wasilewski and Kostrzewa 2025). Importantly, inclusive leadership also introduces a critical concern with power. As communication regulates the terms upon which participation becomes possible, critical leadership scholars emphasize that leadership discourse can simultaneously empower and constrain organizational

actors (Banks 2008; Gabriel 1997; Sinclair 2007; Nye 2008). Inclusive language may function as an enabling mechanism of participation but also as a subtle form of organizational regulation. Consequently, inclusive leadership should be understood neither as a purely managerial tool, nor as an inherently emancipatory practice, but as a contested rhetorical process situated within broader relations of power. Inclusive leadership extends these approaches by examining how communicative processes shape participation, recognition, legitimacy, and belonging under unequal conditions of power.

Taken together, these perspectives should be viewed as complementary rather than competing as they reveal a progressive broadening of analytical focus. Discursive leadership explains how leadership emerges through communication; linguistic leadership explains how language functions as a mechanism of influence; rhetorical leadership explains how persuasion operates through communicative practice; and inclusive leadership examines how these processes shape participation, recognition and legitimacy. The conceptual framework advanced in this article integrates insights from all four traditions while addressing a limitation in each. Existing approaches rarely provide a systematic account of how communication, identity and power interact in the constitution of inclusion. To address this gap, the following sections develop a rhetorical theory of inclusive leadership centered on three mutually interdependent dimensions: *discursive construction*, *identity formation* and *power mediation*, as they explain how inclusion is produced, negotiated, legitimized and contested within organizational life. The following section therefore examines how these communicative dynamics are reflected in contemporary leadership theories and styles.

4. Inclusion in leadership rhetoric: A critical-discursive comparison of leadership styles

The previous section distinguished discursive, linguistic, rhetorical and inclusive leadership as complementary communication-centered approaches to leadership. The present section examines leadership styles that have been particularly influential in contemporary discussions of inclusion. Not aimed at providing an exhaustive review of leadership theory, it identifies those approaches that contribute directly to the proposed conceptual framework.

Some leadership styles were chosen because they represent a distinct rhetorical pathway through which inclusion may be constituted. *Transformational leadership* emphasizes vision and charismatic framing; *relational and compassionate leadership* foregrounds the co-construction of meaning; *servant leadership* prioritizes ethical dialogue and participation; and *humble leadership* promotes reflexive openness and epistemic recognition. Together, these approaches illustrate different ways

in which communication shapes belonging, legitimacy and participation, thereby providing the theoretical foundations for the proposed model. A central underlying assumption is that leadership styles may be understood not merely as behavioral repertoires, but also as rhetorical configurations. Each mobilizes particular communicative mechanisms, constructs leader credibility differently and embodies distinct assumptions about authority, participation and power. Comparing these styles (Table 1) through a rhetorical lens provides insight into the communicative foundations of inclusive leadership.

Leadership Style	Primary Rhetorical Mechanism	Inclusivity Potential	Dominant Appeal	Power Orientation	Principal Limitation
Trans-formational Leadership	Visionary framing and inspirational narratives	Moderate–High	Ethos + Pathos	Leader-centered	Risk of charismatic dependency
Relational and Compassionate Leadership	Co-construction and dialogue	High	Ethos	Shared and relational	Ambiguous authority structures
Servant Leadership	Invitational communication and ethical dialogue	High	Ethos	Decentralizing	Risk of symbolic participation
Humble Leadership	Reflexive discourse and epistemic openness	Moderate–High	Ethos + Logos	Shared learning	Potential authority ambiguity
Inclusive Leadership	Recognition, voice, and legitimacy	Highest	Logos + Ethos + Pathos	Participation-oriented	Susceptible to performative inclusion

Table 1. Comparative rhetorical capacity of leadership styles. Author’s own synthesis

Although contemporary leadership approaches frequently share commitments to participation, engagement and organizational effectiveness, they differ substantially in their underlying communicative assumptions. Examining these differences is particularly important for a rhetorical theory of inclusive leadership. The comparison presented in the Table 1 demonstrates a gradual shift from leader-centered influence toward increasingly participatory and dialogic forms of communication. Inclusive leadership synthesizes elements of all traditions while placing voice, legitimacy and participation at the center of analysis. This progression provides an important foundation for the conceptual framework developed in the article, particularly its dimensions of discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation.

4.1 Transformational leadership: Vision, identification, and charismatic persuasion

Transformational leadership remains one of the most influential leadership paradigms and provides an important starting point for understanding the rhetorical dimensions of inclusion. Originally developed by Burns (1978) and later operationalized by Bass (1985) and Avolio and Bass (1995), transformational leadership emphasizes charismatic influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. From a rhetorical perspective, these dimensions depend heavily on leaders' ability to articulate persuasive and meaningful collective narratives and align individual identities with organizational goals. Kark et al. (2003) demonstrate that transformational leadership contributes directly to identity construction by shaping collective understandings of purpose and membership. This insight reveals a significant connection between transformational leadership and inclusive leadership, as inclusion frequently depends upon shared narratives capable of accommodating diverse organizational members.

Transformational leaders create persuasive visions that may facilitate belonging, encourage participation and promote collective commitment. However, rhetorical analysis also reveals limitations. Because transformational leadership frequently relies on charismatic authority, it may reproduce hierarchical relationships and encourage dependency on leader-centered visions (Jabbar et al. 2020; Ngwama and Ogaga-Oghene 2022; Oyewobi 2024; Suryawan et al. 2021). In terms of rhetorical appeals, transformational leadership primarily mobilizes *pathos* through inspirational narratives and *ethos* through charismatic credibility. Therefore, its inclusivity potential depends significantly on whether its visions enable plural participation or merely reinforce dominant interpretations.

4.2 Relational and compassionate leadership: Inclusion through co-construction

Relational leadership shifts attention away from charismatic influence toward communicative interaction itself. Uhl-Bien (2006) conceptualizes leadership as a fundamentally social process that emerges through relationships rather than individual action. Similarly, Hollander's (2009) work emphasizes the reciprocal nature of leadership, while Dutton et al. (2006) highlight compassion as a mechanism through which organizational members experience recognition, support and value. From a rhetorical perspective, relational leadership aligns closely with the principles of discursive leadership as leadership emerges through dialogue, shared interpretation and the co-construction of meaning, rather than through the transmission of pre-existing visions. The approach places particular emphasis on communicative accessibility and mutual recognition.

Its primary contribution to inclusive leadership lies in the creation of conditions under which organizational members may participate in meaning-making processes. Compared with transformational leadership, relational leadership provides stronger conditions for participatory inclusion, because legitimacy emerges from interaction rather than charismatic authority. In rhetorical terms, its dominant appeal is *ethos*, understood not as individual credibility, but as relational trust developed through ongoing interaction.

4.3 Servant leadership: Ethical dialogue and invitational participation

Servant leadership offers one of the strongest rhetorical foundations for inclusion, because it explicitly reverses traditional hierarchies of leadership and authority. Originally articulated by Greenleaf (1977) and subsequently developed by van Dierendonck (2011), van Dierendonck et al. (2014), Eva et al. (2019), Laura-Arias et al. (2024), Nielsen et al. (2010), and Kelemen et al. (2020), the approach privileges service, follower development and collective wellbeing over positional authority. The rhetorical significance of servant leadership lies in its close affinity with invitational rhetoric (Foss and Griffin 1995). Rather than persuading through authority, servant leaders seek to create conditions for dialogue, listening and collaborative meaning-making. Empathetic listening, encouragement and participatory discourse constitute one of the clearest examples of how rhetoric may facilitate inclusive participation. Nevertheless, critical perspectives warn that servant leadership may obscure underlying power relations. As Liu (2019) argues, the discourse of service does not automatically eliminate structural inequalities. Organizational actors may experience symbolic inclusion without a meaningful redistribution of influence. Thus, servant leadership highlights a recurrent theme of the present article: inclusion depends not only on communicative openness, but also on the relationship between discourse and power.

4.4 Humble leadership: Reflexivity, recognition, and epistemic openness

Humble leadership has emerged as a major alternative to heroic and charismatic leadership models. Owens and Hekman (2016), Owens et al. (2013), Ou et al. (2014), and Luo et al. (2022) demonstrate that humility contributes positively to learning, trust, creativity, engagement and team performance. Unlike transformational leadership, humble leadership does not depend primarily on visionary persuasion. Instead, it constructs influence through openness, self-reflection, acknowledgement of limitations and recognition of others' expertise. Its importance for inclusive leadership stems from its emphasis on epistemic inclusion. By publicly acknowledging uncertainty and valuing alternative perspectives, humble leaders create conditions that allow diverse organizational voices to become visible.

Rhetorically, this approach combines *ethos* and *logos*: credibility emerges from openness and integrity, while inclusion is supported through learning-oriented dialogue and shared knowledge creation. However, humble leadership also presents a significant rhetorical tension: Articulated vulnerability may strengthen perceptions of authenticity, yet excessive humility may weaken perceptions of authority and decisiveness (Diao et al. 2019). Consequently, humble leadership demonstrates that inclusive communication is always shaped by contextual expectations concerning power, legitimacy, and leadership credibility.

In order to facilitate further comparison, Table 2 summarizes the dominant communicative logics of the leadership styles by identifying their central rhetorical question and primary inclusivity focus. Although the leadership styles discussed above differ considerably in their assumptions about authority, participation and influence, they converge around a shared communicative premise: inclusion is not achieved through managerial behavior, but through the rhetorical construction of relationships, identities and organizational meanings. The comparison reveals that participation can be fostered through multiple rhetorical pathways, including visionary persuasion, relational dialogue, ethical service, reflexive openness and explicit recognition of diverse voices. This convergence invites a broader theoretical interpretation. Rather than treating these leadership styles as isolated approaches, they may be understood as different manifestations of deeper rhetorical processes. Constitutive and invitational rhetoric provide particularly valuable perspectives in this regard, as they explain how discourse simultaneously creates collective identities and enables participatory forms of communication.

	Transformational Leadership	Relational and Compassionate Leadership	Servant Leadership	Humble Leadership
Core Communicative Question	<i>Where are we going together?</i>	<i>How can we understand this together?</i>	<i>How can I support others' participation?</i>	<i>What might I be missing?</i>
Inclusivity Focus	Collective purpose and commitment	Mutual recognition and participation	Service, empowerment and collaboration	Learning, recognition and voice

Examples of rhetorical mechanisms and communicative practices	Articulating a compelling organizational vision.	Facilitating open dialogue during decision-making processes.	Prioritizing listening before proposing solutions.	Publicly acknowledging mistakes or limitations.
	Using future-oriented narratives to create collective commitment.	Encouraging collaborative problem definition.	Inviting employee participation in strategic discussions.	Requesting critical feedback from employees.
	Framing organizational change as a shared mission.	Co-constructing organizational goals with employees.	Using facilitative rather than directive communication.	Encouraging alternative interpretations and viewpoints.
	Employing symbolic slogans that connect individual and collective goals.	Actively acknowledging diverse viewpoints during meetings.	Framing leadership as service to organizational members.	Framing leadership decisions as provisional rather than final.
	Constructing a strong organizational identity around common values.	Using reflective questioning instead of directive communication.	Encouraging collaborative decision-making.	Demonstrating curiosity and openness to learning.
	Using storytelling to generate emotional engagement.	Framing disagreement as a learning opportunity.	Publicly recognizing employee contributions.	Sharing decision-making uncertainty when appropriate.
	Reframing crises as opportunities for collective growth.	Demonstrating empathy during organizational change.	Supporting marginalized voices in organizational discussions.	Recognizing expertise located outside formal leadership roles.
Examples of rhetorical mechanisms and communicative practices	Deploying charismatic speeches that encourage follower identification.	Creating conversational spaces for feedback and reflection.	Building consensus through dialogue rather than authority.	Validating employee knowledge and experience.
	Invoking organizational purpose to motivate discretionary effort.	Reinforcing mutual respect through inclusive language.	Emphasizing shared responsibility for organizational outcomes.	Modelling intellectual humility during strategic discussions.
	Translating strategic objectives into meaningful narratives.	Encouraging distributed ownership of organizational decisions.	Using ethical narratives centered on community and collective wellbeing.	Creating learning-oriented conversational environments.

Dominant rhetorical resources	Visionary framing.	Dialogue	Invitational rhetoric	Reflexive discourse
	Storytelling	Co-construction	Ethical ethos	Humble ethos
	Charismatic ethos	Relational ethos	Empathetic listening	Epistemic openness
	Collective identity narratives	Listening practices	Participatory dialogue	Learning narratives
	Inspirational pathos	Communicative reciprocity	Collaborative framing	Recognition of expertise

Table 2. Comparison of communicative logics, practices and resources of leadership styles. Author's own synthesis

4.5 Constitutive and invitational rhetoric as integrative perspectives

The preceding analysis demonstrates that contemporary leadership styles differ in their rhetorical mechanisms and assumptions regarding participation and approaches to power; yet, they share a common dependence upon communication as the medium through which inclusion becomes meaningful. This convergence becomes particularly visible when viewed through constitutive and invitational rhetoric. *Constitutive rhetoric* explains how leadership discourse creates collective identities rather than merely addressing pre-existing audiences (Charland 1987; White 1985). Leaders therefore do not simply guide communities; they rhetorically constitute communities by defining belonging, legitimacy and membership. This insight links directly to the identity formation dimension of the proposed framework. *Invitational rhetoric* (Bone et al. 2008; Foss and Griffin 1995), by contrast, emphasizes dialogue, mutual understanding, equality and shared meaning-making. Rather than focusing on persuasion as influence, it conceptualizes communication as a collaborative process through which participants construct understanding together. This perspective connects directly to the participatory ambitions of inclusive leadership.

Together, constitutive and invitational rhetoric provide the theoretical bridge between rhetorical theory and leadership scholarship. While constitutive rhetoric explains how organizational identities are produced, invitational rhetoric explains how participation may be facilitated. Their integration reveals that inclusion is neither solely a behavioral outcome, nor merely a communicative technique. Rather, it is a rhetorical accomplishment situated at the intersection of *discourse, identity and power*. The above comparative analysis of leadership styles reveals that inclusion is consistently mediated through communication, yet no existing approach fully explains how discourse, identity formation and power operate

together in the constitution of inclusion. This limitation motivates the next step in the argument: the following section therefore moves beyond leadership styles and develops a rhetorical ontology of inclusive leadership, positioning inclusion as a communicatively constituted and power-laden process.

5. Inclusive leadership: From behavioral models to rhetorical ontology

Transformational, relational, servant and humble leadership all rely upon rhetorical processes of meaning-making, identity formation and participant engagement, but they primarily conceptualize communication as a means of achieving leadership outcomes. The present article advances a different perspective. Rather than treating inclusion as the consequence of effective leadership behavior, it conceptualizes inclusion as a communicatively constituted phenomenon emerging through discourse, rhetorical practice and relation of power. This distinction is particularly important because communication-centered approaches to leadership are frequently conflated despite their different analytical orientations. *Inclusive leadership* builds upon these communicative foundations, but introduces a fundamentally different concern. While linguistic leadership explains how leaders use language, inclusive leadership addresses to what ends language is used and who benefits from the resulting communicative arrangements. Inclusion therefore extends beyond symbolic influence to encompass participation, recognition, belongingness and legitimacy. Consequently, although inclusive leadership depends strongly on the linguistic and rhetorical dimensions of leadership, it cannot be reduced to them because it introduces a critical concern with identity and power.

This distinction becomes particularly visible within mainstream inclusive leadership research. Studies within organizational psychology commonly defines inclusive leadership through leader behaviors that foster psychological safety, belongingness, uniqueness and participation (Carmeli et al. 2010; Hirak et al. 2012; Mor Barak 2015; Nembhard and Edmondson 2006; Randel et al. 2018; Shore et al. 2011). More recently, systematic reviews have described inclusive leadership as a multilevel construct that promotes both belongingness and uniqueness while acknowledging substantial contextual variation in its implementation (Korkmaz et al. 2022). Within this tradition, inclusive leadership is generally associated with positive organizational outcomes including creativity, innovation, engagement, and performance (Hornsey and Jetten 2004; Mor Barak and Cherin 1998; Nishii and Mayer 2009).

Although these approaches have generated valuable empirical findings, they still largely conceptualize inclusion as a behavioral outcome produced by leaders,

rather than as a communicative process through which organizational realities are constructed. As a consequence, they often underemphasize the discursive mechanisms through which inclusion becomes meaningful, legitimate and actionable. Reframing inclusive leadership as a rhetorical-discursive phenomenon therefore requires an ontological shift from the question of what leaders do to the question of how inclusion is constituted through communication. This shift aligns inclusive leadership more closely with discursive leadership theory, while simultaneously extending it. If discursive leadership emphasizes the communicative constitution of leadership itself (Denis et al. 2010; Fairhurst 2007), inclusive leadership focuses on how participation, belonging and legitimacy are constitutively produced through communicative interaction. Inclusion becomes neither an objective organizational condition, nor a stable managerial outcome, but an ongoing rhetorical accomplishment.

This perspective also necessitates greater attention to power. Critical leadership scholarship consistently demonstrates that communication both enables and constrains organizational action (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Collinson 2005). Leadership discourse may create opportunities for participation, while simultaneously regulating the conditions under which participation becomes possible. As Collinson (2005) argues, leadership frequently operates through tensions between control and resistance, empowerment and regulation, inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion therefore cannot be assumed to be inherently emancipatory. Rather, it should be understood as a contested process in which rhetorical practices define whose voices become legitimate, which identities become recognized and what forms of participation are considered acceptable.

Recent rhetorical scholarship reinforces this concern by emphasizing the intimate relationship between discourse and power. Inclusive language may facilitate recognition and participation, but it can also function as a mechanism of soft control when organizational norms are naturalized and rendered uncontested (Wasilewski and Kostrzewa 2025). Similarly, rhetorical leadership is concerned not merely with communication itself but with how discourse translates into influence, legitimacy and power outcomes (Langford 2024). Inclusion consequently operates at the intersection of rhetoric and power, simultaneously enabling participation and regulating organizational membership.

In summary (Table 3) inclusive leadership is not primarily a behavioral style, but a rhetorical-discursive practice constituted through discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation, operating through *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* under specific institutional conditions. The conceptual contribution advanced here is threefold. First, it shifts the ontological status of inclusive leadership from a behavioral construct to a constitutive rhetorical process. Second, it explicitly

integrates power into the conceptualization of inclusion, rather than treating it as an implicit contextual factor. Third, it positions classical rhetorical theory as a central resource for understanding inclusion: in particular, Aristotle's triad of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* provides for analyzing how inclusion is justified, legitimized, and experienced in organizational life. Inclusion is thus not merely a managerial practice, but a persuasive accomplishment dependent upon the successful coordination of rhetorical appeals.

By integrating insights from critical leadership studies and styles, constitutional and invitational rhetoric the present article advances a rhetorical ontology of inclusive leadership. This perspective moves beyond behavioral explanations by conceptualizing inclusion as a communicatively constituted and power-laden phenomenon. The following section further develops this argument by demonstrating how *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* function as the primary rhetorical mechanisms of contemporary leadership research.

6. Rhetorical foundations of inclusivity: *Logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* revisited

In the proposed framework *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* are not treated merely as persuasive appeals, rather, they function as constitutive mechanisms of inclusion. *Logos* shapes how inclusion is rationalized and justified, *ethos* determines how legitimacy and recognition are established, and *pathos* enables emotional identification and belonging. The relevance of this perspective is supported by both classical and contemporary rhetorical theory. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the capacity to identify the available means of persuasion in a particular situation (*Rhetoric* I.2 1355b). This situational understanding is particularly relevant because inclusion is itself a negotiated and context-dependent phenomenon. Modern rhetorical scholarship extends this insight by emphasizing the constitutive power of discourse. Burke's (1969) concept of identification highlights that rhetoric does not simply persuade, but creates symbolic connections across difference. Similarly, Black (1970) demonstrated that inclusion always implies exclusion, as rhetorical constructions of collective identity inevitably define insiders and outsiders. More recently, researchers (Stormer and McGreavy 2021; Wasilewski and Kostrzewa 2025) have emphasized that inclusion depends upon communicative accessibility and meaningful participation in processes of collective meaning-making. Viewed from this perspective, inclusive leadership requires more than effective communication. It requires rhetorical practices that simultaneously justify participation, establish legitimacy and cultivate belonging. The Aristotelian triad provides useful framework for examining these mechanisms.

6.1 *Logos: Justifying inclusion*

In Aristotelian rhetoric, *logos* refers to persuasion through reasoning and argument (*Rhetoric* I.2 1356a). Within organizational contexts, logos provides the cognitive and normative foundations upon which inclusion becomes justified. Leadership discourse frequently employs arguments concerning performance, innovation, creativity and competitiveness to explain the value of diversity and inclusion (Kochan et al. 2003). Such arguments shape how organizational actors understand inclusion and why they consider it necessary. However, *logos* involves considerably more than the presentation of information. Leaders construct inclusion through framing processes, policy narratives, metaphors and enthymematic reasoning that define what is considered reasonable, legitimate and desirable. As Gkalitsiou and Kotsopoulos (2023) demonstrate, storytelling and metaphorical framing remain important persuasive resources in leadership communication, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and change.

At the same time, critical approaches remind us that rationality is never neutral. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argue that argumentation always presupposes hierarchies of values and criteria of legitimacy. Consequently, *logos* may function as a mechanism of power by determining which forms of knowledge are recognized and which perspectives are marginalized. Inclusion discourse frequently becomes instrumentalized when ethical arguments are subordinated to performance-based concerns, reducing inclusion to a business case rather than a normative commitment.

The leadership styles discussed in the previous section reveal different configurations of *logos* in the construction of inclusion. Transformational leadership employs *logos* primarily through visionary framing, strategic reasoning and the articulation of collective goals, using rational narratives to align followers with organizational objectives. Servant leadership relies more on ethical reasoning, emphasizing collective well-being, reciprocity, and moral responsibility as the basis of organizational decision-making. Humble leadership mobilizes *logos* through reflexive inquiry, shared learning and openness to alternative forms of knowledge, encouraging critical reflection rather than certainty. Inclusive leadership integrates these approaches while combining instrumental and normative justifications of participation, recognition and fairness. Within the present framework, *logos* therefore performs two related functions. First, it enables the discursive construction of inclusion by providing explanations, narratives and justifications. Second, it regulates participation by defining legitimate forms of knowledge and acceptable contributions. Inclusive leadership requires reflexive forms of *logos* that remain open to multiple ways of knowing rather than privileging a single organizational rationality.

6.2 *Ethos: Legitimacy, recognition, and credibility*

If *logos* concerns justification, *ethos* concerns legitimacy. Aristotle defined *ethos* as persuasion achieved through the character and credibility of the speaker (*Rhetoric* I.2 1356a). Contemporary rhetoric has expanded this understanding by emphasizing that credibility is not an individual possession, but a relational accomplishment dependent upon audience recognition (Hyde 2020). This relational understanding is particularly important for inclusive leadership because inclusion depends fundamentally on processes of recognition. Organizational members must not only be present within institutions; they must also be acknowledged as legitimate participants whose contributions matter. *Ethos* therefore functions as a mechanism through which recognition, authority and legitimacy are distributed.

Recent scholarship reinforces this broader interpretation. Beard's (2009) concept of *ethical listening* suggests that *ethos* involves not only speaking credibly, but listening in ways that validate diverse experiences and perspectives. Inclusive leadership therefore requires a relational *ethos* that combines credibility with responsiveness, openness and recognition. A major threat to this process is *performative inclusion*. As Nour and Kjeldsen (2025) argue, organizations frequently employ inclusive language without corresponding institutional change, creating a gap between discourse and practice. Under such conditions, inclusive rhetoric may undermine rather than strengthen credibility. *Ethos* therefore depends upon consistency between communicative claims and organizational realities.

The leadership styles discussed in the previous section reveal different configurations of *ethos*. Transformational leadership constructs *ethos* through visionary credibility (Burns 1978). Servant leadership emphasizes moral responsibility and care. Humble leadership establishes legitimacy through openness, vulnerability, and acknowledgement of limitations (Owens et al. 2013; Owens and Hekman 2016). Inclusive leadership integrates these elements while placing particular emphasis on recognition, responsiveness and relational openness. Within the present framework, *ethos* contributes primarily to identity formation because legitimacy determines whose identities and voices become recognized within organizational life.

6.3 *Pathos: Belonging, identification and emotional commitment*

Whereas *logos* justifies and *ethos* legitimizes, *pathos* connects organizational actors emotionally to collective identities and purposes. Aristotle emphasized that emotions influence judgment and therefore constitute an essential dimension of persuasion (*Rhetoric* II.1 1378a). Contemporary rhetorical scholarship similarly recognizes that participation depends not only on rational agreement, but also on affective engagement. Inclusion requires more than formal access

to decision-making processes. Individuals must also experience belonging, recognition and emotional investment in organizational communities. According to Burke's notion of identification (Burke 1969), inclusion becomes possible when individuals can identify with collective narratives while maintaining their distinctiveness.

Leadership communication often cultivates such identification through storytelling, symbolic language and emotional narratives. Cornelissen et al. (2008) and Gkalitsiou and Kotsopoulos (2023) demonstrate how metaphorical and narrative forms shape organizational understanding and emotional engagement. Consequently, *pathos* functions as a central mechanism through which organizational commitment and belonging are constructed. Yet *pathos* also introduces risks: emotional appeals may conceal inequalities by creating an appearance of collective unity while leaving structural asymmetries untouched. As Hyde (2020) notes, affective identification may become manipulative when emotional commitment substitutes for genuine participation. For this reason, inclusive leadership requires reflexive and ethically grounded uses of *pathos*.

Different leadership styles mobilize *pathos* in distinctive ways. Transformational leadership relies heavily on inspiration and collective aspiration. Servant leadership foregrounds empathy, care and compassion. Humble leadership evokes trust through openness and authenticity, while inclusive leadership synthesizes these approaches by cultivating belonging and recognition while maintaining sensitivity to difference. Within the present framework, *pathos* operates across all three dimensions of the model because emotional identification influences meaning construction, identity formation and power relations simultaneously.

Taken together (Table 3), *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* provide more than a taxonomy of persuasive appeals. *Logos* shapes the discursive construction of inclusion by defining what counts as legitimate knowledge and acceptable participation. *Ethos* supports identity formation by producing recognition, credibility and legitimacy. *Pathos* fosters emotional identification and belonging while simultaneously influencing relationships of power.

<i>Logos</i> as a Mechanism of Inclusion	<i>Ethos</i> as a Mechanism of Inclusion	<i>Pathos</i> as a Mechanism of Inclusion
Framing inclusion through arguments and organizational narratives.	Establishing leadership credibility.	Cultivating belonging and identification.
Constructing policy rationales and strategic justifications.	Producing legitimacy and recognition.	Promoting emotional engagement.

Defining legitimate knowledge and expertise.	Validating organizational identities.	Constructing collective commitment.
Structuring organizational sense-making.	Enabling voice and participation.	Supporting participation and recognition.
Enabling or restricting epistemic participation.	Connecting communication to trust.	Mobilizing support for organizational values.

Table 3. *Logos, ethos and pathos*, as operating mechanisms of inclusion. Author's own synthesis

The analytical contribution of this framework lies precisely in this reconceptualization. Rather than treating rhetoric as a communicative tool of leadership, it positions rhetoric as the constitutive mechanism through which inclusion itself is produced. The following section builds on this insight by integrating *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* into a three-dimensional model of discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for understanding inclusive leadership as a rhetorical-discursive practice of power.

6.4 Practical applications of the framework in organizations

To demonstrate the practical applicability of the proposed framework, Table 4 translates the three conceptual dimensions into organizational communication practices and leadership development activities. The framework is not intended solely as an analytical tool for rhetorical scholarship; it also provides guidance for organizational practitioners seeking to foster more inclusive communication, strengthen participation and critically reflect on the relationship between discourse and power. By linking discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation to concrete leadership behaviors and training interventions, the framework illustrates how inclusive leadership may be operationalized in contemporary organizational settings.

Framework Dimension	Examples of Organizational Communication Practices	Examples of Leadership Development and Training Activities
Discursive Construction	- Developing organizational narratives linking diversity, inclusion, and strategic goals. - Using inclusive framing during organizational change initiatives. - Designing onboarding communication that signals belonging from the first day. - Replacing deficit-oriented language ("fitting in") with participatory language ("contributing perspectives").	- Narrative leadership workshops. - Framing and reframing exercises. - Communication strategy simulations.

Discursive Construction	• Using storytelling to demonstrate how diverse perspectives strengthen learning and innovation. • Constructing mission statements that recognize multiple forms of expertise and identity. • Framing disagreement as a source of organizational learning rather than resistance. • Establishing communication guidelines that encourage respectful plurality of viewpoints.	Inclusive storytelling training. • Metaphor analysis and message-design activities. • Case studies examining organizational rhetoric during change and crisis.
Identity Formation	• Public recognition of diverse employee contributions. • Encouraging employees to share professional and personal experiences during team interactions. • Including underrepresented voices in high-visibility projects and discussions. • Creating mentoring programs that strengthen belongingness. • Developing symbolic rituals that reinforce inclusion and collective identity. • Encouraging broader participation in organizational decision-making. • Using leadership communication to validate different forms of expertise and experience. • Promoting narratives linking individual uniqueness to collective organizational identity.	• Active listening exercises. • Perspective-taking simulations. • Recognition and feedback workshops. • Identity-awareness training. • Inclusive meeting facilitation practice. • Stakeholder dialogue simulations.
Power Mediation	• Rotating speaking opportunities during meetings. • Establishing formal mechanisms for upward feedback. • Including employees in agenda-setting processes. • Auditing communication practices for patterns of exclusion. • Reviewing whose voices dominate decision-making discussions. • Creating safe channels for dissent and critical feedback. • Encouraging leaders to justify decisions transparently. • Explicitly recognizing informal power dynamics within teams.	• Critical reflection exercises on authority and privilege. • Training on managing dissent and disagreement. • Simulations involving conflicting stakeholder interests. • Inclusive decision-making workshops. • Analysis of hidden communication hierarchies. • Reflexive leadership coaching and developmental feedback.

Table 4. Practical applications of the discursive-rhetorical framework of inclusive leadership. Author's synthesis (derived from conceptual framework)

Table 4 shows that each dimension of the framework possesses both analytical and practical significance. Discursive construction emphasizes how leaders shape organizational realities through language; identity formation highlights the communicative processes through which recognition and belonging are achieved; while power mediation draws attention to the institutional conditions that enable or constrain participation. Together, these dimensions provide a foundation for leadership development initiatives aimed not only at improving communication effectiveness, but also at strengthening the inclusivity and legitimacy of organizational participation.

The proposed framework also offers a foundation for leadership development and training. Traditional leadership programs frequently emphasize behavioral competencies such as communication skills, conflict management or decision-making. However, a rhetorical understanding of inclusive leadership suggests that leaders must also develop competencies related to meaning construction, identity recognition and power awareness. Consequently, leadership development should not focus exclusively on behavioral performance, but also on the communicative processes through which inclusion is constituted and sustained. Suggested training implications are structured around the dimensions of the Aristotelian triad (Table 5):

	Training Focus	Example Exercise
Logos	Inclusive argumentation and ethical justification of decisions	Framing and policy communication simulations
Ethos	Trust, credibility, recognition, and ethical listening	Feedback, listening, and recognition workshops
Pathos	Belonging, empathy, storytelling, and emotional engagement	Storytelling exercises and empathy-based simulations

Table 5. Training *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. Author's suggestions for leaders and/or trainers

From a developmental perspective, the framework suggests that inclusive leadership should be trained as a *rhetorical competence*. Leaders then must learn how to construct inclusive meanings (*discursive construction*), recognize and legitimize diverse organizational identities (*identity formation*) and critically reflect on how communication shapes participation and influence (*power mediation*). Consequently, leadership development becomes a process of cultivating *rhetorical literacy* alongside managerial competence.

To illustrate how rhetorical mechanisms operate in organizational settings, Table 6 translates the Aristotelian appeals of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* into concrete leadership communication practices. Rather than treating these appeals merely as persuasive techniques, table 6 demonstrates their constitutive role in the production of inclusion. Together, these rhetorical mechanisms connect leadership communication to the discursive construction of inclusion, the formation of organizational identities and the mediation of participation and power.

	Typical Leadership Applications	Primary Inclusion Function	Key Rhetorical Outcome
Logos	• Presenting evidence supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives. • Using data to justify organizational change. • Explaining promotion decisions through transparent criteria. • Demonstrating how inclusion contributes to innovation and performance. • Developing policy rationales grounded in fairness and organizational values. • Constructing strategic narratives linking inclusion to long-term organizational sustainability. • Using reasoned argumentation to resolve team conflicts. • Encouraging evidence-based participation during meetings.	Justifies inclusion, establishes legitimacy, and defines acceptable forms of participation and knowledge.	Legitimizes inclusion through reasoned justification.
Ethos	• Admitting mistakes publicly. • Acting consistently with stated organizational values. • Listening visibly and respectfully to dissenting voices. • Demonstrating fairness during evaluation processes. • Following through on inclusion commitments. • Recognizing contributions regardless of hierarchy. • Maintaining transparency in decision-making. • Modelling integrity during organizational crises.	Establishes credibility, trust, recognition, and legitimacy among organizational members.	Creates credibility, trust, legitimacy, and recognition.
Pathos	• Sharing stories that highlight employee experiences. • Celebrating collective achievements. • Communicating organizational purpose through emotionally meaningful narratives. • Expressing empathy during uncertainty or change. • Recognizing employees during difficult circumstances. • Using symbolic language to reinforce community and belonging. • Creating rituals that strengthen team identity. • Framing organizational success as a shared achievement.	Cultivates belonging, emotional engagement, identification, and collective commitment.	Cultivates belonging, identification, and emotional commitment.

Table 6. Operationalization of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in inclusive leadership practice. Author's synthesis

Table 6 further demonstrates that rhetorical appeals are not isolated communicative tools, but interdependent mechanisms through which inclusion is justified, recognized and experienced. Effective inclusive leadership requires the balanced deployment of all three appeals: *logos* without *ethos* may reduce inclusion to instrumental reasoning, *ethos* without *logos* may weaken legitimacy, while *pathos* without critical reflection risks emotional manipulation. The interaction of these appeals therefore provides a practical and analytical foundation for the conceptual framework developed in the subsequent section.

7. A conceptual framework of inclusive leadership as discursive-rhetorical practice

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that scholarship of contemporary leadership increasingly recognizes the importance of communication, participation and inclusion, yet existing approaches remain fragmented. No existing approach fully explains how discourse, identity formation and power interact in the constitution of inclusion. The present article addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates these dimensions within a unified rhetorical theory of inclusive leadership. Building on insights from rhetoric, discourse studies, organizational communication and leadership theory, the framework conceptualizes inclusive leadership as a discursive-rhetorical practice of power rather than a behavioral style or managerial outcome. Inclusion is therefore understood not as a stable organizational condition, but as a communicative accomplishment continuously produced, negotiated and contested through language, identity construction and relations of power. This perspective aligns with broader discursive approaches to leadership (Denis et al. 2010; Fairhurst 2007, 2009; Wodak et al. 2011), while extending these through a stronger integration of inclusion, rhetoric and critical perspectives on power.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) conceptualizes inclusive leadership around three mutually interdependent dimensions: discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation. These dimensions are not sequential stages, but simultaneously operating processes through which inclusion acquires meaning, legitimacy and practical consequences.

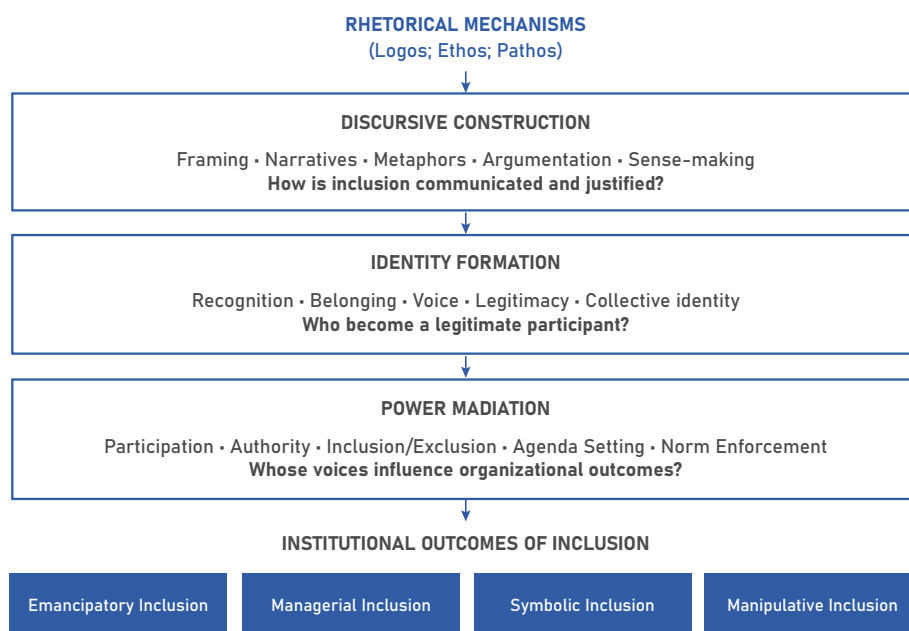


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of inclusive leadership as discursive-rhetorical practice

Discursive Construction: The first dimension concerns the communicative processes through which inclusion becomes meaningful. Leaders construct organizational realities through framing devices, narratives, metaphors, symbolic representations and rhetorical appeals that define belonging, participation and legitimacy. Drawing on Fairhurst and Sarr's (1996) theory of framing and Grint's (2005) rhetorical account of leadership, and broader traditions of discursive leadership, the framework conceptualizes inclusion as a product of meaning-making, rather than an objective organizational state. Discursive construction therefore addresses the question: *How is inclusion communicated, framed, and justified?* At this level, rhetoric functions primarily through the production of organizational narratives and interpretive frameworks that shape how inclusion is understood and discussed.

Identity Formation: The second dimension concerns the relational processes through which organizational actors develop experiences of belonging, legitimacy, recognition and voice. Drawing on constitutive rhetoric (Charland 1987; White 1985), organizational identity scholarship (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016), and inclusion research (Randel et al. 2018; Shore et al. 2011), the framework argues that inclusion depends upon communicative recognition. Organizations do not simply include individuals; they constitute participants through discourse. Inclusive leadership therefore involves continuous processes through which identities are acknowledged, legitimized and integrated into collective organizational narratives. Identity formation therefore addresses the question: *Who becomes recognized as a legitimate organizational participant?* At this level, inclusion emerges through recognition, voice, and participation in organizational meaning-making.

Power Mediation: The third dimension concerns power. Existing inclusive leadership models frequently treat inclusion as inherently positive, often leaving power relations implicit. In contrast, the present framework treats power as constitutive of inclusion itself. Building on critical leadership scholarship (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Collinson 2005), the framework recognizes that leadership communication simultaneously enables and constrains participation. Leaders influence whose voices become legitimate, which forms of knowledge are valued and what types of participation are considered acceptable. Inclusion therefore cannot be understood independently of the institutional arrangements that shape access, authority and legitimacy. Power mediation addresses the question: *Whose voices influence organizational outcomes?* At this level, inclusion function as a mechanism of empowerment, coordination, symbolic recognition or organizational control, depending upon the conditions of participation.

Logos, ethos, and pathos across the framework: A central contribution of the framework is the integration of Aristotelian rhetoric into inclusive leadership

theory. Rather than treating logos, ethos and pathos as communication techniques, the model conceptualizes them as cross-cutting mechanisms through which inclusion is produced and sustained (Table 7.)

	Discursive Construction	Identity Formation	Power Mediation
<i>Logos</i>	Frames, justifies, and rationalizes inclusion through arguments, narratives, and organizational reasoning.	Establishes cognitive legitimacy for participation and membership.	Determines which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate.
<i>Ethos</i>	Establishes the credibility and trustworthiness of leadership communication.	Produces recognition, legitimacy, and validation of identities.	Influences whose voices receive authority and trust.
<i>Pathos</i>	Creates emotional engagement through narratives, symbols, and storytelling.	Fosters belonging, identification, and commitment.	Mobilizes participation and support while potentially reinforcing or challenging power arrangements.

Table 7. Operational role of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* within the discursive-rhetorical framework. Author's conceptual synthesis

The relationship among these appeals is neither static nor hierarchical. *Logos* primarily supports discursive construction through justification and argumentation. *Ethos* contributes most directly to identity formation by determining recognition and legitimacy. *Pathos* operates across all dimensions because emotional identification shapes meaning-making, belonging and authority simultaneously. Together, the three appeals function as the rhetorical infrastructure through which inclusion is justified, legitimized and experienced.

Institutional Outcomes of Inclusive Leadership: The framework further suggests that inclusive leadership may generate substantially different organizational outcomes depending on how discourse, identity and power interact. Inclusion should therefore not be regarded as inherently emancipatory. Four ideal-typical outcomes may be distinguished: Table 8. responds directly to critical concerns about performative inclusion and demonstrates that rhetoric can both facilitate and constrain participation.

Outcome Type	Characteristics
Emancipatory Inclusion	Participation is genuine and accompanied by meaningful redistribution of influence and recognition.
Managerial Inclusion	Participation is encouraged but remains aligned with existing organizational priorities and power structures.
Symbolic Inclusion	Inclusive language is present, yet substantive organizational change remains limited.

Manipulative Inclusion	Inclusion discourse functions primarily as a legitimizing strategy that masks existing asymmetries of power.
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Table 8. Characteristics and types of organizational outcomes. Author's synthesis

8. Theoretical contribution, practical implications and future research

The principal contribution of this article is not merely the observation that inclusion is rhetorical. Rather, the contribution lies in specifying the mechanisms through which rhetoric produces inclusion and demonstrating how these mechanisms operate under different conditions of power. The framework advances existing scholarship in three principal ways.

First, it proposes an *ontological shift* from understanding inclusion as a psychological state or behavioral outcome toward understanding it as a rhetorically accomplished social reality. Inclusion is not simply experienced; it is constructed through communicative processes that define belonging, legitimacy and participation. Second, the framework introduces a *mechanistic explanation* of inclusion by integrating *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* into leadership theory. Whereas existing approaches often acknowledge communication without explaining how it produces inclusion, the present framework specifies the rhetorical processes through which organizational actors justify inclusion, establish legitimacy and cultivate belonging. Third, the framework contributes a *critical perspective on power*. Rather than assuming that inclusion is inherently beneficial, it demonstrates how inclusion may simultaneously enable participation and reproduce organizational control. This perspective extends existing inclusive leadership research by recognizing the coexistence of empowerment and regulation, cooperation and hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion.

Beyond theory, the framework also provides a foundation for organizational practice. The model offers guidance for leadership development, organizational communication, diversity initiatives and management education by translating discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation into communicative and developmental interventions. It therefore positions rhetorical competence not as an auxiliary leadership skill, but as a central condition of inclusive organizational practice.

Future research may build upon the framework in several directions. First, empirical studies should examine how rhetorical mechanisms operate within everyday leadership communication. Second, researchers should investigate the distinction between *invited* and *authentic* participation in organizational settings. Third, comparative and cross-cultural studies may reveal how inclusion is constituted differently across sociocultural contexts. Finally, future work should

explore how rhetorical practices shape the transition between emancipatory, managerial, symbolic and manipulative forms of inclusion.

In conclusion, the article argues that inclusive leadership is best understood as a discursive-rhetorical practice of power. By integrating rhetorical theory, leadership and discourse studies and critical perspectives on power, the proposed framework reconceptualizes inclusion as a communicatively constituted phenomenon operating through discursive construction, identity formation and power mediation. In doing so, it provides both a theoretical foundation for future research and a practical framework for understanding how inclusion is constructed, negotiated and contested in contemporary organizational life.

“Let this, then, suffice as an account of the art of [Inclusive] Rhetoric.”

– Aristotle, *Rhetoric* III.19, 1420b

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