

## ENHANCING WORKGROUP EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN A MARITIME INSTITUTION

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the influence of inclusive leadership on workgroup effectiveness. The study posits that (a) encouraging and appreciating employees, (b) respecting and treating employees fairly, and (c) rational tolerance of failure, as dimensions of inclusive leadership, severally and collectively enhance workgroup effectiveness. This relationship was tested using data collected from 125 respondents ( $M_{age} = 32.30$  years,  $SD = 4.84$ ) drawn from the General Company for Ports of Iraq (GCPI), the managing company of Umm Qasr Port, Iraq. The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. The results revealed a significant and positive relationship between inclusive leadership (and its dimensions) and workgroup effectiveness. Specifically, the results suggest that workgroup leaders rely more on the “encouraging and appreciating employees” inclusive leadership practice in achieving workgroup effectiveness. The study concludes with highlights about the consequences of this and other outcomes and offers some recommendations for research and practice.*

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Leadership, Workgroup Effectiveness, Umm Qasr Port, Iraq.*

### INTRODUCTION

In today's turbulent and competitive environment, inclusive leadership has become a critical requirement in managing workgroups not only to achieve the long-term organisational goals but also to ensure active participation and satisfaction of employees (Ashikali *et al.*, 2020; Hassan and Jiang, 2021; Xiaotao *et al.*, 2018). Leaders practice inclusion by focusing on simultaneously satisfying employees' need demands for workgroup participation and belongingness as well as achieving organisational goals. Consequently, employees may attain their full potential, adapt to difficulties, collaborate across boundaries, and improve their workgroup effectiveness. Leaders play a critical role in ensuring that inclusivity is implemented (Xiaomei and Chaomin, 2021). Jia *et al.* (2021) identified inclusive leadership as a critical factor contributing to inclusive climate and the collective effectiveness of employees working in groups. Indeed, a recent review (Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022) has mapped several studies that reported the positive effects of inclusive leadership on a range of organisational outcomes. However, there is a strong indication that the relationship was mainly investigated at the construct level, thereby neglecting the peculiar but equally important effects of inclusive leadership dimensions on group-level outcomes. This gap is also present in the leadership literature concerning maritime organisations like ports.

Maritime institutions depend on the relationship between administrative officials and their subordinates in achieving their goals. This has been the case at Umm Qasr Port of Basra, Iraq. The Port consists of two sections: the old berths, numbering eight, and the new berths, numbering thirteen, with an additional four under construction (Desher, 2019). Umm Qasr Port was built and organised to receive various general goods, containers, grain, sulphur, and travellers. The design capacity of the total berths is about 8.850 million tonnes annually, with a storage capacity of about 614,000 tonnes per year (Desher, 2019; Desrosiers, 2009). Hundreds of workgroups and leaders, all from various cultural and national backgrounds, collectively man and operate the vast Umm Qasr maritime facility, both in times of peace and conflict. The management effectiveness at the Port points to the existence of some contextual leadership factor that makes such event possible. In this study, the researcher considers inclusive leadership to be a contextual element influencing the efficiency of workgroups.

Workgroup effectiveness requires more than just one employee coming up with fresh ideas; it also demands mutual communication among workgroup members towards achieving the common objective (Al-Atwi and Al-Hassani, 2021; Jia *et al.*, 2021). These demands are characteristics of inclusive leadership. Inclusive leaders have the power to make additional resources available to their teams, which enhances the potential of team members to generate new ideas. Thus, leaders receptive to new ideas and novel approaches coming from their workgroup members create, by so doing, an environment where workgroup members feel empowered to contribute and be recognised for their contributions (Hassan and Jiang, 2021; Nguyen *et al.*, 2020).

Leaders empower their workgroup members to identify and solve problems and generate new ideas with the leader's assistance. However, effective inclusion of workgroup members with diverse skills, wants, and orientations may likely be a highly challenging responsibility to the group leader and therefore may demand the investment of extra-ordinary efforts, especially on the part of the leader. These are precisely the challenges senior managers face at the General Company for Ports of Iraq (GCPI), the company charged with managing the Umm Qasr Port and other ports in Iraq (Alfayyadh, 2017). Thus, this study attempted to address the question: Do inclusive leadership matter in generating and enhancing workgroup effectiveness at the Umm Qasr Port? The primary purpose of the current study is to answer this question.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Inclusive Leadership

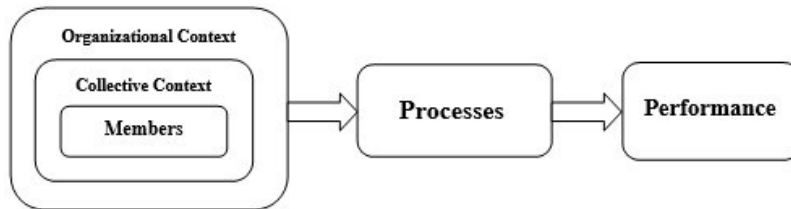
Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) have been credited with coining "inclusive leadership" or "leader inclusiveness." However, several conceptualisations of inclusive leadership exist in the literature, but there is no consensus on any one of them. Therefore, this study must advance the perspective from which it approaches the construct. According to Katsaros (2022), inclusive leadership encompasses leaders' behaviours that make workgroup members willingly identify with their workplaces and encourage their active participation in group/organisational processes, thus enhancing group/organisational performance. For Yoo *et al.* (2022), the term describes leaders' openness and genuine identification with group

members' voices as the leaders interact with the members so that the members feel part of the group's discussions and feel ownership of its decisions by virtue. Inclusive leaders exhibit openness in their interactions with followers and include them in discussions and decisions. Whatever the perspective the construct is viewed, some of the elements common to them include shared goals, vision, and relationship between the leader and workgroup members that coalesced to positively influence group performance (Qi *et al.*, 2019). Thus, inclusive leadership represents a set of positive leader behaviours facilitating employees' feeling of belongingness in their workgroups while maintaining the uniqueness of the individual members within the group (Randel *et al.*, 2018).

In this study, inclusive leadership was operationalised as a three-dimensional construct consisting of encouraging and appreciating employees, respecting and treating employees fairly, and rational tolerance of failure (Fang *et al.*, 2019). The "encouraging and appreciating employees" dimension measures the support, mentoring, appreciation and empowerment that inclusive leaders provide for their workgroup members. It also covers such practices as setting appropriate goals in collaboration with members, appreciating members' contributions, providing constructive feedback, and creating an open group environment that is receptive to new ideas (Fang *et al.*, 2019). The "respecting and treating employees fairly" dimension evaluates inclusive leaders' practice of workplace democracy, justice that guarantees equality of access to opportunities for members, and equitable distribution of benefits consistent with the psychological needs of group members (Fang *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the "rational tolerance of failure" dimension assesses the inclusive leader's ability to understand and appreciate the details surrounding occasional group task failure and rationally tolerate them as part of the learning process for better group performance (Fang *et al.*, 2019).

### **Workgroup Effectiveness**

Berber *et al.* (2020) aver that many studies on workgroup effectiveness were based on the Input → Process → Output (IPO) model, visualised in Figure 1. *Input* refers to the competencies the individual brings to the workgroup; *process* describes the interactions between workgroup members; and *output* refers to the results of the group activities, including tangible and intangible outcomes (Kozlowski *et al.*, 1999). Based on the provisions of the IPO model, researchers develop a three-dimensional structure of workgroup effectiveness consisting of internal integration, external adaptation, and satisfaction (Lourenço *et al.*, 2014). Yoo *et al.* (2022) define workgroup effectiveness as "the degree to which a team accomplishes the expected goals" (p. 1). It arises from group members uniting their resources and efforts, coordinating their knowledge and skills in performing the group's functions (Vlas *et al.*, 2022). Decisions taken collectively are more accurate than the decisions of an individual and thus achieve better results for the group while enhancing the performance of its members in the future (Herdman *et al.*, 2017). Thus, workgroup effectiveness is achieved when there is a positive relationship between individuals working within the group to achieve the organisation's goals (Berber *et al.*, 2020).



Source: Berber *et al.* (2020, p. 3).

**Figure 1. The IPO Workgroup Effectiveness Model**

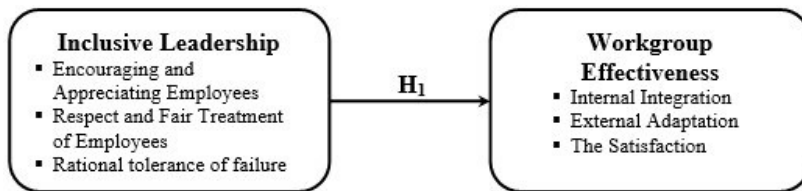
In this study, workgroup effectiveness was operationalised in three dimensions: namely, internal integration, external adaptation and group members' satisfaction (Lourenço *et al.*, 2014). The integration of internal processes, including policies, rewards, training, leadership, and shared goals, provides the cohesion necessary to create a functional workgroup that can perform effectively. Conversely, external adaptation describes a group's or an organisation's sensitivity to developments in their operating environment that breeds within the group or organisation tolerance for error, valuing calculated risks, and looking towards future opportunities and challenges. Finally, group member satisfaction is vital to increase the effectiveness of the workgroups, such as the quality of the relationship and the emotional acceptance of the team's decisions and the management of the organisation, which is positively reflected in the achievement of real teamwork that achieves the goals of the group.

### **Hypotheses and Conceptual Framework**

The empirical literature generally supports the argument that inclusive leadership positively influences workgroup effectiveness (Xiaomei and Chaomin, 2021). However, only a few researchers have empirically studied the three dimensions of inclusive leadership—encouraging and appreciating employees, respecting and fair treatment of employees, and rational tolerance of failure—on workgroup effectiveness. Mitchell *et al.* (2015) examined the impact of inclusive leadership on the efficiency of various workgroups and found the relationship is significant and positive. Employee productivity rises when leaders encourage and appreciate employees, respect and treat them fairly, and rational tolerance of employees' occasional failure. This open and inclusive leadership can significantly positively impact workgroup effectiveness.

Thus, leaders must consider how to improve individual performance and how to encourage collaboration among team members to boost overall workgroup effectiveness by being sensitive to the workgroup's political climate (Salisu and Awang, 2019). Inclusive leadership blends the features of transformational and transactional leadership to produce a leadership practice that responds to employees' contributions and treats workgroup members on equal footing. Workgroup members tend to be more committed to their tasks if they see the leader's inclusive behaviour (Carmeli *et al.*, 2010). Ultimately, workgroup goals, job satisfaction, and task effectiveness may benefit from a more inclusive approach to leadership that encourages participation from all members. Accordingly, the researcher posits one variable-level and three dimensional-level hypotheses (illustrated in Figure 2), as follows:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Inclusive leadership practices will have a significant and positive influence on workgroup effectiveness.
- H<sub>1a</sub>: Encouraging and appreciating employees will have a significant and positive influence on workgroup effectiveness.
- H<sub>1b</sub>: Respecting and fairly treating employees will significantly and positively influence workgroup effectiveness.
- H<sub>1c</sub>: Rational tolerance of employees' occasional failure will have a significant and positive influence on workgroup effectiveness.



**Figure 2. The Hypothetical Study Model**

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Location**

The study was conducted at Umm Qasr Port, the most prominent Iraqi maritime institution located in the Basra Governorate in the Umm Qasr area near the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. As mentioned earlier, the GCPI is responsible for managing the Umm Qasr Port and other Iraqi ports (Deshler, 2019). It is considered one of the most strategic ports in Iraq because it is located in the north of the Arabian Gulf, 46 km from the city of Basra. The Port has 21 berths (see Figure 3), with a total capacity of 10,500 thousand tons per year. Fourteen special berths were allocated for general merchandise with a capacity of 3500 thousand tonnes per year and two sulphur berths with a capacity of 3000 thousand tonnes per year. The other berths are dedicated to containers, grains, and merchandise. The lengths of the berths range between 80 and 200 meters per berth, with a combined length of 3,952 meters (Altop, 2020).



Figure 3. The Berths of Umm Qasr Port

Previous researchers, including Ostbo and Hunt (2004), Shahab (2011), and SIGIR (2009), have underscored the importance of leadership in the effective management of Port Umm Qasr. Several recent graduate studies (e.g., Alfayyadh, 2017; Altop, 2020; Desher, 2019; Hussein, 2013) have re-echoed this need in studies highlighting the crucial role Port Umm Qasr plays in Iraqi trade and economy. This study contributes to this line of research by looking into the specifics of leader–workgroup dynamics critical to the effective functioning of this strategic maritime facility.

### Research Participants

The research participants were drawn from the ranks of senior managers and workgroup leaders/members working for the GCPI at the Umm Qasr Port, Basra, Iraq. As a procedural measure to obviate the possibility of common method variance associated with survey data (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), the researcher collected the data from both leaders and members of the workgroups who were specifically to submit their survey questionnaire only when they were sure of the veracities of the information they provided. The researcher administered the questionnaire to 162 workgroup leaders/members willing to participate in the survey. A nonresponse rate of 18.52% took away 30 potential questionnaires from the expected respondents, and a further seven were lost due to missing data. Thus, the study analysis was carried out using data from 125 questionnaires. The researcher's interactions with some of the participants suggest that they have a clear awareness about the importance of workgroups at the Port and the need for teamwork in performing their various functions. However, they exhibit a vague understanding of "inclusive leadership," even as some of them somehow identify with one or two of the construct's three dimensions. Hence, the researcher operationalised the research instrument in a manner they will relate to it based on their daily workgroup routines.

### Research Instruments

Consistent with the suggestions given in Cowles and Nelson (2019b), the researcher used published and validated survey questionnaires in collecting the study data. Survey

questionnaires are widely used instruments that adequately tap respondents' feelings, opinions, attitudes, and behaviours (Cowles and Nelson, 2019a). Further, the researcher used different rating scales for the two constructs studied as a procedural measure for minimising incidences of common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Thus, the inclusive leadership variable was assessed using a 5-point Likert agreement scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. For the outcome variable, workgroup effectiveness was evaluated based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Totally disagree* to 7 = *Totally agree*.

*Inclusive Leadership*: In this study, the scale developed and validated by Fang *et al.* (2019) was employed in assessing the respondents' perceptions of inclusive practices of leaders at their workgroups. Sample items included "In my work, the leaders actively ask my opinions and thoughts" (Encouragement and Recognition to Employees); "The leaders treat employees fairly" (Respect and Fair Treatment for Employees); and "The leaders can rationally accommodate our mistakes" (Failure Tolerance) (Fang *et al.*, 2019, p. 11). Fang *et al.* (2019) reported good internal consistency reliability for the scale ( $\alpha = 0.930$ ).

*Workgroup Effectiveness*: In this study, the scale developed and validated by Lourenço *et al.* (2014) was employed in assessing the respondents' perceptions of workgroup effectiveness. Sample items included "Leaders encourage the search for solutions by their team members" (Internal Integration); "Criticisms that are made to the group are carefully analysed in order to improve" (External Adaptation); and "Group members are satisfied with the way the leader organises and coordinates the team activities" (Satisfaction) (Lourenço *et al.*, 2014, p. 127). The scale developers reported acceptable internal consistency reliability for the scale's dimensions: internal integration ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), external adaptation ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ), and satisfaction ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) (Lourenço *et al.*, 2014, p. 128). However, following the recommendation of Lourenço *et al.* (2014), the 9-item "team performance measure" (p. 132) was used as a proxy for workgroup effectiveness and was accordingly treated at the global level of analysis.

## **Analysis Strategy**

In line with the suggestions of Watkins (2021), the researcher computed the study's descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Following the same guidelines and using the same software, the researcher also performed the correlation analysis to test the strength of the relationships between encouraging and appreciating employees and workgroup effectiveness (Hypothesis H<sub>1a</sub>), between respecting and fairly treating employees and workgroup effectiveness (Hypothesis H<sub>1b</sub>), and between rational tolerance of employees' occasional failure and workgroup effectiveness (Hypothesis H<sub>1c</sub>).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The 125 respondents were evenly spread across the 21 berths at Umm Qasr Port plus the Port's Logistics Office. Most of the participants (88%) are male, with a mean age of 32.30 years and

$SD = 4.84$ . The descriptive statistics given in Table 1 under the “Mean” column represents the assessments made by the respondents about the study variables. The mean statistics and standard deviations ( $SD$ ) suggest that the respondents are reasonably aware of the state of inclusive leadership practices at the Port of Umm Qasr (i.e., encouraging and appreciating workers, respecting and fair treatment of workers, and rational tolerance of failure), and also appreciate how these practices impact workgroup performance.

**Table 1. Shapiro-Wilk Test for the Study Variables**

Variables	Dimensions	Mean		Shapiro-Wilk		
		Stat.	SD	Stat.	df	Sig.
<b>Inclusive Leadership</b>	Encourage and appreciate	1.24	2.90	.972	125	.200
	Respect and fair treatment	0.72	3.24	.962	125	.065
	Rational tolerance of failure	0.75	3.29	.967	125	.081
	<b>Total</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>3.14</b>			
<b>Workgroup Effectiveness</b>	Internal integration	0.33	3.51	.977	125	.062
	External adaptation	0.35	3.56	.966	125	.020
	The satisfaction	0.29	3.69	.955	125	.020
	<b>Total</b>					

Furthermore, data normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Shapiro and Wilk, 1965). González-Estrada and Cosmes (2019) suggest using the Shapiro-Wilk test as it is a robust statistic highly sensitive to the normality structure in survey data. The results of the normality tests on the data for the inclusive leadership and workgroup effectiveness variable are given in Table 1 under the Shapiro-Wilk column. From the results, the values of the significance level for the two variables and their respective dimensions are all greater than the axis of inclusive leadership, and its dimensions are greater than the conventional alpha of 0.05, which means that the data follow a normal distribution. The data are therefore suitable for correlation analysis.

### Reliability

Reliability measures the consistency of the search scale and the stability of its results over different periods. The structural stabilities of the measurement tools were verified by using Cronbach’s alpha test (Cronbach, 1947). Notwithstanding the recent intense debates among scholars (see Cho, 2021; Sijtsma and Pfadt, 2021) on the use of the alpha in testing for a scale’s internal consistency reliabilities, several scholars, including Greco *et al.* (2018) and Raykov and Marcoulides (2019) have affirmed its value, especially in psychological testing. Thus, the reliabilities of inclusive leadership and workgroup effectiveness are shown in Table 2. Based on Nunnally and Bernstein’s (1994) threshold value of 0.70 defining scale reliability, the results of this study, as shown in Table 2, indicate robust internal consistency reliabilities for both inclusive leadership ( $\alpha = 0.805$ ) and workgroup effectiveness ( $\alpha = 0.844$ ). Also, alpha for the dimensions of the two variables ranged between a minimum of  $\alpha = 0.803$  and  $\alpha = 0.875$ .



**Table 2. Reliability Coefficients for the Study Measurement Tools**

Variables	Dimensions	No. of Items	Dimension Alpha	Variable Alpha
<b>Inclusive Leadership</b>	Encourage and appreciate	5	0.824	<b>0.805</b>
	Respect and fair treatment	3	0.803	
	Rational tolerance of failure	3	0.802	
<b>Workgroup Effectiveness</b>	Internal integration	3	0.875	<b>0.844</b>
	External adaptation	3	0.866	
	The satisfaction	3	0.873	

### Structural Analysis

The researcher tested the structural relationship between inclusive leadership and workgroup effectiveness using the loadings/path coefficients and the  $R^2$  value. Path coefficients are indicators of the assumed relationships between the predictor and outcome variables, specifying the strength of relationships between the variables (Nayebi, 2020).  $R^2$  represents the proportion of the variance for an endogenous variable that is accounted for by the variance of an exogenous variable (Hair *et al.*, 2022). According to the results in Table 2, the path coefficient of workgroup effectiveness from inclusive leadership is positive and significant ( $r = 0.814$ ,  $t = 14.717$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The results further indicate that respecting members and fairly treating them has the highest correlation with workgroup effectiveness ( $r = 0.863$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), followed by the practice of tolerating and understanding members' occasional shortcomings ( $r = 0.828$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), with overt encouragement and commendations ( $r = 0.637$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) as the dimension that least correlated with workgroup effectiveness.

**Table 2. Path Coefficients of Workgroup Effectiveness from Inclusive Leadership Independent**

Variable Dependent	Encourage	Respect	Rational	Inclusive	$p$ - Value
	and appreciate	and fair treatment	tolerance of failure	Leadership Total	
<b>Variable Workgroup Effectiveness</b>	0.637	0.863	0.828	0.814	0.000
<b>Calculated <math>t</math>- Value</b>	7.822	14.487	12.638	14.717	0.000

Furthermore, the researcher conducted multiple regression analyses to ascertain the relative contributions of each dimension of inclusive leadership to the prediction of workgroup effectiveness at the Port of Umm Qasr. The researcher estimated the significance of each path using a bootstrapping method utilising SPSS's default 1,000 resampling (Watkins, 2021). Results shown in Table 3 revealed that the three dimensions of inclusive leadership collectively explained 70% of the variance in the workgroup effectiveness at the Port ( $F = 84.16, p < 0.001$ ). This outcome suggests that workgroup leaders at Umm Qasr Port rely heavily on inclusive practices in making their teams perform effectively.

However, the pertinent question must be asked: Which of the inclusive leadership practices is most important? In answering this question, the researcher determined the magnitude of contribution by each of the three inclusive leadership dimensions (Table 3). The results show that the "encouraging and appreciating employees" dimension contributed most significantly to the regression model ( $F = 25.60, p < 0.001$ ) and is thus the most important practice of inclusive leadership, accounting for 38% ( $R^2 = 0.38$ ) of the variance in workgroup effectiveness. This is followed by the "rational tolerance of employees' occasional failure" factor, which accounted for an additional 26% of the variation in workgroup effectiveness ( $F = 50.56, p < 0.001$ ). Lastly, the "respect and fair treatment of employees" element explained 22% of the variance workgroup effectiveness ( $F = 19.22, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 3. Impact of Inclusive Leadership Dimensions on Workgroup Effectiveness**

Leadership Dimensions	Inclusive		Statistical Indicators				Comments
	Cal. $F$	Tab. $F$	$P$ -Value	$R^2$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	
Encourage and appreciate	25.60	6.97 $df$ = 99%	0.000	0.38	0.22	2.15	Significant at 0.01
Respect and fair treatment	19.22		0.000	0.22	0.25	1.45	Significant at 0.01
Rational tolerance of failure	50.56		0.000	0.26	0.65	0.28	Significant at 0.01
Inclusive Leadership Total	84.16		0.000	0.70	0.51	0.55	Significant at 0.01

## CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the influence of inclusive leadership practices on the effectiveness of workgroups at the Port of Umm Qasr, situated at Basra in the Republic of Iraq. The Port is the largest in Iraq and handles a wide range of cargo, including chemical, merchandise and general goods in addition to people. It is, therefore, necessary for the various workgroups manning the 21 plus berths at the Port to function at peak effectiveness. This study posited and tested the role of inclusive leadership in bringing about such workgroup

effectiveness. Thus, on the basis of the results, the researcher concludes that inclusive leadership practices have a significant and positive influence on workgroup effectiveness at Umm Qasr Port. Specifically, it was found that the act of encouraging and appreciating employees contributed significantly to enhanced workgroup effectiveness; that by respecting and treating employees fairly, group leaders could continue to make a positive impact on the performance of their workgroups; and that by careful tolerance of employees' occasional failure, the leaders are empowering workgroup members to work better and more effectively.

## Recommendations

The first recommendation relates to further research. It has been noted in the literature review section of this study that the largest portion of studies on workgroup effectiveness utilised the IPO model (Kozlowski *et al.*, 1999). The model posits the possible existence of mediators between the input (which in this study is inclusive leadership) and the output (workgroup effectiveness). However, the study did not consider the possible mediating influences of several variables, including organisational missions, goals, strategies, and even conflict, which may alter the direction and structure of the inclusive leadership–workgroup effectiveness relationships as reported in this study. Also, in addition to the input factors at the group level addressed in this study, the other two levels of analysis are not considered, viz, the individual and environmental levels. Accordingly, it is recommended that future research may focus on one or two aspects pointed out here.

The second recommendation relates to the practice of leadership. Based on the outcomes of this study, it is recommended that senior managers and workgroup leaders at the GCPI should give greater attention to employee mentoring, empowerment and training as these are some of the readily available management technologies the company could utilise in encouraging enhanced performance among members of the various workgroups across the 21 berths at the Umm Qasr Port. Nevertheless, the issue of showing employees respect and fairly treating them should be looked into as infarctions of the notion of distributive and interactive justices in organisations may carry consequential adversities.

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