

Internal Communication and Inclusive Leadership in Relation to Employee Performance: a Case Study of a Seat Cover Manufacturer

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Abstrak: Sektor manufaktur masih menjadi salah satu penopang utama perekonomian Indonesia, namun daya saingnya kini lebih ditentukan oleh cara perusahaan mengelola komunikasi, kepemimpinan, dan pelaksanaan kerja sehari-hari daripada sekadar skala produksi. Penelitian ini bertujuan memahami bagaimana komunikasi internal dan kepemimpinan inklusif dipraktikkan dalam kaitannya dengan kinerja karyawan di PT SSC, sebuah produsen sarung jok mobil berorientasi ekspor di Jawa Barat yang berhasil melampaui target penjualan tetapi belum konsisten dalam capaian produksi hariannya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan dari empat belas informan di empat divisi melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumen internal, lalu dianalisis secara tematik dan ditriangulasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rutinitas komunikasi, peran kepemimpinan, dan kapabilitas karyawan sebenarnya sudah ada, tetapi belum terhubung secara konsisten dalam pekerjaan sehari-hari. Kondisi ini memunculkan pemahaman yang tidak merata, praktik kepemimpinan inklusif yang berbeda-beda antarpemimpin, serta kesenjangan kapabilitas tenaga kerja. Penelitian ini mengusulkan sebuah sistem eksekusi kinerja-manusia terpadu yang dibangun di atas tiga pilar yang saling terkait, yang diharapkan memberi manfaat praktis bagi perusahaan manufaktur padat karya yang menghadapi persoalan serupa.

Kata kunci: kepemimpinan inklusif; kinerja karyawan; komunikasi internal; manajemen kinerja; manufaktur

Abstract: Manufacturing remains one of the main pillars of Indonesia's economy, yet its competitiveness now rests more on how firms manage communication, leadership, and day-to-day execution than on production scale alone. This study sets out to understand how internal communication and inclusive leadership are practiced in relation to employee performance at PT SSC, an export-oriented car seat cover manufacturer in West Java that met its sales target but did not turn that into steady daily output. The study uses a qualitative case study approach. Data were drawn from fourteen informants across four divisions through semi-structured interviews, observation, and internal records, and were then analysed thematically and triangulated. The findings show that communication routines, leadership roles, and worker capability already exist but are not joined up in daily work, which leaves uneven understanding, inconsistent inclusive leadership, and gaps in capability. The study proposes an integrated people-performance execution system built on three linked pillars, which may offer practical value for labor-intensive manufacturers facing similar problems.

Keywords: employee performance; inclusive leadership; internal communication; manufacturing; performance management

Introduction

Manufacturing is still one of the main engines of Indonesia's economy. In the second quarter of 2025 it made up about 18.67 per cent of gross domestic product, and it remains a large employer (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025). Size alone, though, no longer keeps a firm competitive. What counts more now is how productive the workforce is and how well the organisation runs from one day to the next (World Bank, 2024). Indonesia's own figures bear this out, since its labour productivity

has tended to trail several neighbours, which points to management and execution as much as to machines (Rezki, 2025).

Much of that execution comes down to employees. How well people do their work, how steady their quality stays, and how well they cooperate all shape whether a plant hits its targets (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2018). Fibriadi, Yusuf, and Abduh (2022) describe employee performance as a sign of how well staff carry out their duties, and Arisman (2022) adds that leadership, motivation, and discipline all feed into it. Performance is not only a matter of individual skill. It also reflects the guidance and support a worker receives, which is why Aguinis (2014) treats performance management as a continuous process of direction, feedback, and development rather than a once-a-year appraisal.

Two organisational factors sit close to this daily work. The first is internal communication. More than passing messages down a line, it is the work of building shared understanding about tasks, targets, and standards (Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). Nadales-Gallego, Galindo-Reyes, and Garrido-Moreno (2025) describe good internal communication as something that creates alignment and invites participation rather than one-way delivery, and Jacobs, Yu, and Chavez (2016) tie it to results by showing how clear, timely information lets people work accurately and catch mistakes early. Where work needs a lot of coordination, communication becomes a resource in its own right (Rachmani, Sarwoprasodjo, Muljono, & Pertamasari, 2025). It also has a quieter side. Whether people feel safe enough to ask a question or admit a mistake, what Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv (2010) call psychological safety, shapes how much of that communication lands. This study reads internal communication through clarity, channels and flow, feedback and responsiveness, and psychological safety (Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2016; Carmeli et al., 2010).

The second factor is inclusive leadership. Carmeli et al. (2010) picture inclusive leaders as available and open in everyday work, leaving room for people to raise ideas and concerns. Roberson and Perry (2021) add that such leaders listen, support their staff, and respond well to differences, which helps people feel they belong and want to contribute. The benefit shows up in practice. Kanya and Johan (2025) link support from inclusive leaders to better team performance, Verawati, Suharnomo, and Djastuti (2025) tie recognition and closeness to stronger motivation, and Siddiquei et al. (2025) stress that taking employee voice seriously matters most where work is tightly coordinated. This study reads inclusive leadership through voice encouragement, accessibility, recognition and appreciation, and participation and fairness (Roberson & Perry, 2021; Wolor et al., 2025).

Two theories help make sense of how these factors work. Job Demands-Resources theory splits any job into demands, which take effort and can wear people down, and resources, which help them cope and stay motivated (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Read this way, communication and inclusive leadership act as resources. They do not remove the pressure of a production target, but they help people understand a task, find help, and keep going. Social Exchange Theory looks at the relationship instead. When people feel they are treated fairly and supported, they tend to give back with effort and ownership (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Because leaders stand in for the company in daily work, a leader who listens, recognises good work, and is fair is likely to be repaid in commitment, while one who is not may find people holding back.

PT SSC brings these ideas down to a single shop floor. It is an export-oriented car seat cover manufacturer in West Java, set up in 2005 with strong Japanese ownership, and its work is labour-intensive and made to order. Commercially the firm has done well and passed its 2024 sales target. Its internal numbers are less settled. Through 2025 productivity sat below the 98 per cent target, at roughly 93 to 94 per cent, and the Non-Good (NG) rate often ran past its 3 per cent limit to between 6 and 8 per cent. Average earnings per employee fell from about Rp 11.5 million to between Rp 5.7 and Rp 9 million a month, and for one product group the reject rate reached 13.47 per cent in July 2025 against a 4.25 per cent allowance. Early interviews late in 2025 added a puzzle. Communication and teamwork were generally seen as fine, yet some standards were still missed, which suggested the problem lay less in a single technical fault than in how communication, leadership, and worker capability connect day to day.

Earlier studies have looked at communication, leadership, and performance largely one at a time. Fewer have asked how they work together inside the daily execution of a labour-intensive, export-oriented manufacturer in Indonesia, where what a front-line worker understands and how consistently a leader leads feed straight into output. This study takes up that question. It asks how internal communication and inclusive leadership are practised on PT SSC's floor, what challenges may hold performance back, and what practical steps might help.

This study is motivated by the observed gap between the organization's positive commercial performance and its inconsistent internal operational outcomes, suggesting that strong business results do not necessarily reflect optimal employee performance. To address this issue, the study examines internal communication and inclusive leadership as two key organizational factors that may enhance employee performance. Internal communication is conceptualized through communication clarity, effective communication channels and information flow, feedback and responsiveness, and psychological safety in communication. Inclusive leadership is represented by

leaders' ability to encourage employee voice, ensure accessibility, provide recognition and appreciation, and promote participation and fairness in decision-making. Employee performance is assessed in terms of work quality, quantity, and accuracy, timeliness and cooperation, consistency and work discipline, adaptability and role suitability, and workforce capability as a support for performance management. The relationships among these constructs are grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Performance Management principles. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives suggest that effective communication and inclusive leadership function as critical organizational resources that foster employee motivation, engagement, and reciprocal commitment, ultimately leading to improved employee performance.

Method

This study uses a qualitative case study design, which suits a problem that has to be understood inside its real setting rather than apart from it (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2014). The performance gaps at PT SSC cannot be read off KPI and reject figures alone. They sit in how people talk, how leaders work with their teams, and how ready workers are for the job. Fourteen informants were chosen on purpose for their direct part in production (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). They formed two groups: a main group of two section heads, five line leaders, and four operators, and a supporting group of three department heads who gave a wider managerial view. Taking part was voluntary. Informants gave their consent before each interview, recordings and transcripts were made only with permission, and identities were protected by using role-based codes such as AS-SH or AK-OP rather than names.

Data came from three sources so they could be cross-checked. Semi-structured interviews let people speak in their own words while a guide kept each session on track, with questions shaped for each role and follow-up prompts where answers were brief (Brinkmann, 2013). Non-participant observation covered a morning production briefing, a planning meeting, and a leadership assessment, while internal documents such as KPI sheets and reject reports filled in the record. The material was analysed with thematic analysis, working through the six phases set out by Braun and Clarke (2006): reading into the data, coding, building themes, reviewing them, naming them, and writing up. Interviews carried most of the weight, while observation and documents were used to test what the interviews suggested. A theme was kept only when more than one source supported it, which is the point at which triangulation does its work (Sugiyono, 2018).

Results and Discussion

The analysis produced three themes that, taken together, help explain the performance gaps at PT SSC: uneven understanding in operational communication, variation in inclusive leadership practices, and workforce capability gaps in performance execution. The internal records from April to September 2025 describe the documented problem, while the interviews and observation explain the conditions behind it. Table 1 sets out the participants, and Table 2 the indicators that frame the discussion.

Table 1. Interview participants

Category	Position	Number of participants
Main participants	Section Head	2
	Line Leader	5
	Operator	4
Key supporting informants	Department Head	3

Source: processed by the authors (2026)

Table 2. Selected performance indicators at PT SSC (April–September 2025)

Indicator	Target	Actual
Production productivity	98%	about 93–94% (ranging 89–96%)
Non-Good (NG) rate	≤ 3%	6–8%
K2FP NG rate	≤ 4.25%	13.47% (Jul), falling to 5.70% (Sep)
Earnings per employee	approx. Rp 11.5 million/month	Rp 5.7–9 million/month

Source: internal company data (2025)

Theme 1: Uneven understanding in operational communication.

Communication at PT SSC is busy, but it does not always leave everyone understanding the same thing. The daily work runs on morning briefings, direct instruction, talk between supervisors and operators, and informal questions, and most people described their leaders as easy to approach. Even so, the presence of communication did not guarantee shared understanding. What seemed to matter was how an instruction was explained, how a leader read silence, and whether an employee felt confident enough to ask again.

The first pattern is how differently leaders explain instructions. Some go well beyond stating a task and make sure the person grasps the point and the standard behind it. One section head put the weight on adjusting the message to the individual:

"Instructions must be in the language that he actually understands, because everyone has a different understanding. If I don't adjust, the instruction will still go out but the work may stay the same." (AS-SH, Section Head)

A line leader described much the same habit of giving the reason, not only the task: *"I always tell them why they should do it, not just what should be done" (HL-LL, Line Leader)*. Not every

leader works this way. One assumed that experienced operators need little explanation: *"Operators do not need a very detailed explanation. Once the figures are stated clearly, operators understand the required performance"* (SN-LL, Line Leader). A section head saw the limit of leaning on numbers alone: *"The problem is that operators don't know why the target is 98 per cent. They just follow the number, they don't own the number"* (AR-SH, Section Head). Communicating a target this way may be enough for routine work, but it tends to fall short when a task is new or complex.

The second pattern is about silence and feedback. Here, two leaders read the same behaviour in opposite ways. One department head treated silence with care:

"Silence does not always mean understanding. People always say 'yes' in meetings, but then they make mistakes and their work shows they did not fully understand." (JJ-HD, Department Head)

A section head read it the other way: *"It can be considered that they understand. Usually I ask, 'Do you understand, any questions?' If the answer is just nodding, then that is enough for me"* (AR-SH, Section Head). This contrast is one of the study's key findings. PT SSC has no shared way to check understanding once an instruction is given. Where a nod is taken as understanding, the conversation can end too soon and feedback may arrive only after something has gone wrong. Where silence prompts a check, problems can surface earlier. This sits well with Carmeli et al. (2010), who tie psychological safety to whether people feel able to speak, and it adds a point: in this setting the gap is not only how safe people feel but that no routine exists to confirm what was understood. Feedback, in turn, tended to come late and to correct rather than to guide, which is the opposite of what Jacobs et al. (2016) describe when communication helps operations most.

Taken together, the three patterns point to the same conclusion. The problem at PT SSC is not too little communication but uneven understanding. People talk often, yet how much a leader explains, how silence is read, and how much support a change receives all shift from one leader and one situation to the next. This supports Ophilia and Hidayat (2021), who treat communication as the building of shared meaning rather than the simple sending of messages.

Theme 2: Variation in inclusive leadership practices.

Supportive, inclusive leadership exists at PT SSC, but it is not the same across leaders, divisions, or tasks. People often described their leaders as approachable and willing to listen, yet these good experiences were not universal. They leaned heavily on the individual leader's style and on the backing that leader had from above.

Accessibility was the most visible of these behaviours. One line leader saw the role as a link between management and operators: *"My position is a bridge, from management to operator and also from operator to management"* (AM-LL, Line Leader). Several leaders framed accessibility as closeness kept in check, so that authority is not lost: *"I try to be very close to them, but not so close that my authority gets abused"* (AR-SH, Section Head). Access also changed with level, more direct at the line and more indirect at the department, where it often ran through a coordinator. This lines up with Roberson and Perry (2021) and Carmeli et al. (2010) on accessibility, but it shows how uneven the behaviour can be in practice.

Voice, participation, and fairness were less even. Employees were usually free to speak, but their influence on the decision was limited: *"We are allowed to express our opinion in the meeting, but the leader makes the final decision"* (IQ-OP, Operator). One section head argued against favouritism and said mistakes should be met with support rather than blame: *"If subordinates*

make an error they should be guided and protected, instead of criticised immediately" (AR-SH, Section Head). Backing from higher levels mattered too, since middle leaders can feel undercut when a message changes as it moves down the line. Read through Social Exchange Theory, uneven fairness and backing weaken the give and take that makes people willing to speak up (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This connects to Siddiquei et al. (2025) on taking voice seriously and to Kanya and Johan (2025) on the climate that support creates.

Recognition was present but thin, and it was rarely used on purpose. One operator described it plainly: *"There is appreciation, just thank you. Sometimes I think, is it only thank you? It feels a bit painful"* (AK-OP, Operator). A line leader linked the gap to the wider climate: *"I do not often appreciate my team because I also do not receive appreciation"* (ES-LL, Line Leader). The thin use of recognition echoes Verawati et al. (2025), who tie recognition to motivation, and the remark above suggests the gap can travel down the hierarchy. Inclusive leadership at PT SSC, then, is real but uneven, and strengthening it may take more than coaching individual leaders.

Theme 3: Workforce capability gaps in performance execution.

Performance at PT SSC was shaped by more than how people communicate or lead. Participants spoke plainly about worker capability. How well someone performed was tied to how ready they were for the task, whether the role suited them, and how well they coped when conditions changed.

On readiness, production usually kept running while people were still learning, so a dip in performance could come from the gap between readiness and a new demand rather than from any lack of effort. One department head explained:

"The operators are still learning one process when they are transferred to a new style of working. Each change of model makes them re-learn, and their results become unstable." (JJ-HD, Department Head)

Role fit mattered too. One operator made the point that being misplaced is not the same as being lazy: *"It's common that someone is not supposed to be in this position, but it does not mean they are lazy, it's just that their skill does not fit"* (AK-OP, Operator). Performance also looked fragile when only one or two people really knew a process: *"If the worker who has learned the job is away and someone replaces them, the quantity and quality decrease quickly"* (SN-LL, Line Leader). These findings fit the performance literature (Fibriadi et al., 2022; Arisman, 2022) and Aguinis (2014) on role fit, and they add that readiness was not managed in any deliberate way. Job Demands-Resources theory reads capability and role clarity as resources, so their uneven spread helps explain the unsteady results (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Triangulation across interviews, observation, and records supported all three themes. At the production briefing, the absence of questions did not mean people understood, which backs Theme 1. At the planning meeting and the leadership assessment, participation and recognition were uneven, which backs Theme 2. The leadership assessment and workforce records, including a gap between the planned and actual sewing to non-sewing ratio, backed Theme 3. The picture that emerges is one of three connected problems, not three separate ones. Inconsistent leadership can make people slower to report issues. Uneven capability raises the need for clear communication and close guidance. Unclear communication hits employees with weaker skills hardest.

Reviewing the early five-whys against the full evidence, the refined root cause is that PT SSC may lack an integrated people-performance execution system that links communication checking, inclusive leadership, and capability development in daily work. The firm already has the routines,

the leadership roles, and experienced people. What it lacks is the connection between them. This is where the study adds something. Much earlier work treats communication, leadership, or capability one at a time; here they appear interlocked, and the missing link is what makes the case distinct.

Building on this, the study proposes an Integrated People-Performance Execution System that strengthens PT SSC's existing routines rather than adding a new structure. It rests on performance management, which treats direction, feedback, coaching, and development as ongoing work (Aguinis, 2014). The system has three linked pillars, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Proposed integrated people-performance execution system

Solution pillar	Main focus	Expected contribution
Communication Verification and Contextualization System	Build shared understanding through briefing context, repeat-back, spot-check questions, change-communication checklists, and early follow-up	Fewer misunderstandings, clearer tasks, and steadier execution
Leadership Development and Employee Recognition Program	Make inclusive leadership consistent through practical development, one-voice alignment, non-blaming problem review, coaching, and structured recognition	Stronger voice, fairness, backing, appreciation, and problem reporting
Workforce Capability and Role-Fit Development System	Raise readiness and role fit through a skill matrix, role-fit mapping, backup-operator planning, and targeted cross-training	Less key-person dependency, better role fit, and steadier quality and output

Source: processed by the authors (2026)

The first pillar answers Theme 1 by making work messages clearer and easier to verify before and during the work. The second answers Theme 2 by turning inclusive leadership into specific habits that are coached and reinforced, paired with recognition tied to real behaviour. The third answers Theme 3 by mapping skills, checking role fit, and spreading process knowledge so the work does not rest on a few people. The three are meant to run as one platform, not as separate schemes. Table 4 sets out the plan in a short 5W1H form. Because the study does not test the solution in practice, the expected results should be read as possibilities rather than proven outcomes.

Table 4. Implementation plan (5W1H)

Element	Description
What	Run the three pillars as one system: communication checking, inclusive leadership development with recognition, and workforce capability and role-fit development.
Why	Daily execution is uneven because communication, leadership, and capability are not joined up. The system links them so understanding, support, and readiness hold together.
Who	Management sponsors and protects the programme; HR coordinates tools and monitoring; Department Heads oversee their areas; Section Heads and Line Leaders apply the routines daily; Operators verify understanding, report issues, and join cross-training.
Where	Inside existing settings: management forums for alignment and recognition, meeting rooms for leadership development, and briefing areas and the production floor for verification and skill work.
When	Weeks 1–4 for alignment and tool preparation; months 2–3 for a pilot in one production area; month 4 for evaluation; months 5–6 for phased wider adoption; month 7

Element	Description
	onward for monitoring with quarterly review of NG, productivity, recognition, and skill records.
How	Through simple routines: contextualised briefings with repeat-back and early follow-up; non-blaming feedback, coaching, and monthly behaviour-based recognition; and a process skill matrix, role-fit checks, backup-operator planning, and targeted cross-training.

Source: processed by the authors (2026)

A phased, pilot-first approach suits PT SSC because it builds on routines that already exist, such as briefings, supervision, and coaching, and adds structure instead of a new layer of organisation. A single pilot area can test whether the tools are simple enough for leaders and operators to use, and the feedback can refine them before a wider rollout.

Conclusion

This study looked at how internal communication and inclusive leadership relate to employee performance at PT SSC, a labour-intensive seat cover manufacturer. Performance there was shaped not only by technical factors but by how communication, leadership, and capability were handled day to day. Communication and inclusive leadership are practised through briefings, supervision, teamwork, and informal clarification, but unevenly. Some leaders explain the reasons and the quality behind a task while others stay close to the target, and inclusive behaviours such as encouraging voice, giving honest feedback, recognising effort, and backing the team are not yet consistent. The main challenges, in turn, are uneven understanding, uneven inclusive leadership, and gaps in capability, which show up as repeated clarification, late reporting of problems, unclear roles, and unsteady output.

In response, the study proposes an Integrated People-Performance Execution System with three linked pillars, adopted through a phased, pilot-first approach, and its contribution is to show how the three factors work together in the daily execution of a single labour-intensive manufacturer. A few limits are worth stating. One case limits how far the findings travel, and the data are mostly qualitative, so the proposed system was not tested in practice. Future work could study similar conditions in other manufacturers, test the system once it is in place, add quantitative measures such as employee surveys, and look more closely at how well improvements hold over time.

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