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# Inclusion as a Driving Force for Boundary Spanning in the Public Sector

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### Abstract

A notable gap exists in understanding how inclusive work environments promote collaboration across organizational boundaries. This research examines the psychological mechanisms behind how inclusion encourages boundary-spanning behaviors, focusing on two motivational mechanisms derived from Self-Determination Theory and Public Service Motivation: career aspiration and strength use. Based on cross-sectional survey data from 427 public servants across seven Ghanaian government institutions, a parallel mediation model was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro and a latent-variable SEM, both of which showed excellent fit. Results consistently supported full parallel mediation, with inclusive environments positively influencing both career aspiration and strength use. These mediators, in turn, predicted increased boundary-spanning behavior. The direct effect of inclusion became non-significant when mediators were accounted for. The pathway through strength use was slightly stronger than through career aspiration, indicating that applying one's capabilities provides immediate motivation for cross-boundary work, complementing the future-focused drive of career growth. These findings clarify how inclusion fosters collaboration by revealing its underlying psychological processes. The study emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive climates that support employee development and the use of authentic abilities as strategic tools to enhance interdepartmental collaboration and adaptability in hierarchical public sectors.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Work Environment; Career Aspiration; Strength Use; Boundary-Spanning Behavior; Public Sector.

### Introduction

In modern public administration, the need for coordination across departments and agencies has grown (Elliot et al., 2022). As a result, governance increasingly depends on integrated digital systems and data-driven processes (Jandrić et al., 2019; Yeung, 2023). This situation places public administration within a context where traditional organizational boundaries become more fluid (Conteh & Harding, 2023). Such changes present opportunities for innovation but also pose significant challenges in coordination, accountability, and the delivery of integrated services, key concerns in contemporary public administration (Elliot et al., 2022). In these hybrid environments, boundary spanning proactively connecting across organizational silos to share knowledge and perspectives has become essential for effective and adaptable governance (Williams, 2012; O'Flynn, 2021). Nonetheless, a paradox persists: despite strong advocacy for collaborative governance and networked approaches (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015), hierarchical and exclusionary bureaucratic structures still dominate many public sectors. These systems tend to emphasize compliance and technocratic expertise, which can marginalize alternative knowledge forms and hinder the relational work needed for successful boundary spanning. This tension exposes a critical gap in public administration theory and practice: while concepts like New Public Governance emphasize cross-boundary collaboration, there is little understanding of how to develop the relational capacities needed to implement it within enduring hierarchical systems. Addressing this requires more than structural or technological solutions it demands relational inclusion. We define an inclusive work environment as one characterized by psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and the genuine recognition and valuing of diverse skills and perspectives. This

involves fostering both the feeling of being part of a group (belonging) and encouraging individual contributions based on unique capabilities (uniqueness), setting it apart from broader ideas like supportive leadership or positive organizational climate. Such an environment can empower employees to contribute authentically and collaborate across boundaries (Conteh & Harding, 2023). However, inclusion alone does not automatically lead to collaboration; it works by activating particular psychological pathways. This study focuses on two pathways: career aspiration (future-oriented professional motivation) and perceived growth potential and strength use (the opportunity to apply one's unique capabilities in daily work). These mechanisms are rooted in foundational motivational theories relevant to the public sector. Self-Determination Theory explains how environments that satisfy needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness foster intrinsic motivation, a process facilitated by inclusion. Public Service Motivation emphasizes prosocial and developmental drives that motivate public servants to engage in behaviors that serve the public good, including cross-boundary collaboration. By integrating these perspectives, we propose that career aspiration and strength use are the psychological channels through which an inclusive climate translates into collaborative actions, providing a micro-foundational view of how macro governance ideals are enacted by public servants. Despite increasing interest in collaboration, important theoretical and empirical gaps remain.

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