

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND WORKERS INTEGRATION IN PLASTIC MANUFACTURING FIRMS IN PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of relationship management, a core dimension of emotional intelligence, on workers' integration within plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Workers' integration is examined through the lenses of cultural inclusion, economic inclusion, and emotional inclusion. The study is grounded in Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Framework and supported by Thorndike's Social Intelligence Theory to explore how leaders' relational competencies foster inclusive and supportive organizational environments. Employing a correlational survey research design, the study adopted a cross-sectional time horizon in a non-contrived field setting. Data were obtained using structured questionnaires distributed to a population of 253 employees selected through simple random sampling. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used for univariate analysis, while Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was applied for bivariate analysis. Findings reveal that relationship management has a positive and statistically significant effect on all three dimensions of workers' integration, with the strongest relationship observed between relationship management and emotional inclusion. The study concludes that leaders' ability to manage relationships effectively enhances employees' sense of cultural belonging, equitable access to opportunities, and emotional security in the workplace. It recommends that organizations invest in leadership development programs that emphasize emotional intelligence competencies as a strategic approach to promoting integration, cohesion, and performance in organizational settings

Keywords: relationship management, emotional intelligence, inclusion, leadership, integration, workplace

INTRODUCTION

In modern organizational contexts, the integration of workers has become a central concern for management, especially in industries that rely heavily on human capital and teamwork. Workers' integration involves the extent to which employees are emotionally, economically, and culturally included in the workplace (Mor Barak, 2005). It reflects the degree to which employees feel a sense of belonging, equitable treatment, and psychological safety—factors that directly influence job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Cox & Blake, 1991; Shore et al., 2011). As such, fostering worker integration is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic priority for firms seeking competitive advantage.

One of the most critical drivers of employee integration is leadership behavior, particularly the ability of leaders to manage relationships effectively. Relationship management, a key dimension of emotional intelligence as outlined by Goleman (1998), refers to a leader's ability to build and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, resolve conflicts, inspire and influence team members, and promote collaborative working environments. Leaders who demonstrate strong relationship management are more likely to create inclusive and respectful organizational cultures where employees feel seen, supported, and empowered (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000). This competency is especially important in diverse work settings where managing interpersonal dynamics sensitively and skillfully can enhance both employee engagement and integration (Bar-On, 2006).

In the manufacturing sector—particularly in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State—the relevance of relationship management is increasingly evident. These firms often operate in environments marked by cultural diversity, limited resources, and operational pressures, which can strain relationships between management and employees. When leaders lack the relational capacity to connect with their workforce, issues such as communication breakdown, conflict, exclusion, and low morale may arise (Adeyemi, 2020). Conversely, emotionally intelligent leadership can bridge gaps, promote unity, and ensure that employees from different backgrounds are integrated into the organizational fabric (Salami, 2010).

Despite the growing discourse on emotional intelligence and inclusion, there remains a significant gap in empirical studies that connect leaders' relationship management with workers' integration — particularly within the manufacturing industry in Nigeria. This study, therefore, sought to investigate the influence of relationship management on workers' integration — focusing on cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion — in selected plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. The research contributes to the understanding of leadership effectiveness and inclusive work practices in industrial settings, offering practical recommendations for management development in Nigeria's manufacturing sector.

Specifically, the study seeks to assess how relationship management contributes to cultural inclusion, emotional inclusion, and economic inclusion among employees. The research aims to generate insights that can inform leadership development strategies and promote inclusive workplace practices within the manufacturing sector.

1. To evaluate how relationship management correlate with cultural inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.
2. To examine how relationship management correlate with economic inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.
3. To determine how relationship management correlate with emotional inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

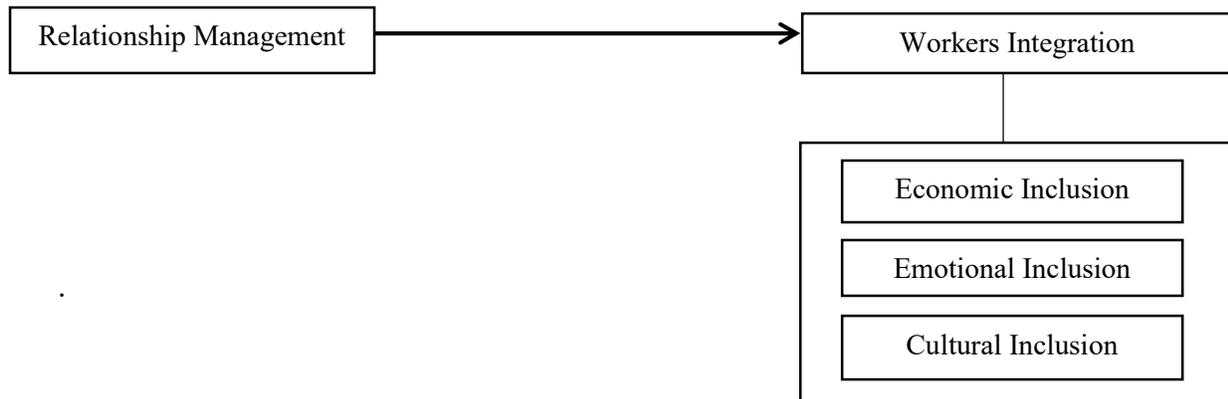


Figure 1: Relationship Management and Workers Integration

Source: Desk Research

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between leaders’ relationship management and workers’ cultural inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt?
2. What is the relationship between leaders’ relationship management and workers’ emotional inclusion in the selected firms?
3. What is the relationship between leaders’ relationship management and workers’ economic inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

The concept of social intelligence was first introduced by Edward L. Thorndike in 1920, where he defined it as “the ability to understand and manage people and to act wisely in human relations” (Thorndike, 1920, p. 228). Unlike abstract or mechanical intelligence, social intelligence emphasizes interpersonal effectiveness, emotional sensitivity, and the ability to build productive human connections. This theoretical framework provides a strong foundation for examining how leaders’ relationship management skills influence workers’ integration, particularly in diverse and dynamic organizational contexts such as plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Thorndike's theory laid the groundwork for later developments in emotional intelligence, especially the dimensions of empathy, social awareness, and relationship management (Goleman, 1998). Leaders high in social intelligence are better equipped to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, communicate effectively, and foster inclusivity within their teams (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987). In organizational settings, such social competencies become essential tools for promoting integration across cultural, emotional, and economic lines.

Relationship management, as a subset of emotional intelligence, can be understood as a practical expression of social intelligence. It involves managing conflict, inspiring others, building bonds, and influencing people positively (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000). Leaders who possess strong social intelligence demonstrate these relational capabilities in a way that fosters inclusion and unity among employees, especially in environments with cultural and socioeconomic diversity.

In the context of cultural inclusion, socially intelligent leaders understand the subtle differences in employee backgrounds, beliefs, and communication styles. They are able to create an environment where diversity is respected and leveraged for team effectiveness (Shore et al., 2011). This aligns with Mor Barak’s (2005) view that inclusion is not merely about representation but about active engagement and integration of all individuals within the organization.

When it comes to emotional inclusion, social intelligence is equally critical. Employees are more likely to feel emotionally safe and connected when leaders display empathy, listen actively, and respond to their emotional needs (Bar-On, 2006). Emotionally inclusive workplaces contribute to lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, and improved performance (Salami, 2010). Socially intelligent leaders create spaces where workers feel respected, valued, and emotionally supported, which in turn strengthens their psychological attachment to the organization.

In terms of economic inclusion, while this may appear more structural, leadership behavior still plays a key role. Socially intelligent leaders advocate for fair treatment, equitable access to resources, and recognition of employee contributions regardless of status or background (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). They foster trust and transparency in decision-making, enabling workers to feel that they are economically visible and equally empowered.

Empirical studies further support the link between social intelligence and workplace integration. For instance, Miao, Humphrey, and Qian (2018) found that leaders who displayed high emotional and social competence were more effective in creating inclusive, high-performing teams. Similarly, Adeyemi (2020) observed that emotionally intelligent leadership significantly improves employee trust, inclusion, and organizational commitment in Nigerian manufacturing firms.

Thus, Thorndike's Social Intelligence Theory provides a compelling lens for understanding how relationship management—as a function of social intelligence—can significantly enhance cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion in the workplace. As organizations in Port Harcourt's manufacturing sector continue to navigate challenges related to workforce diversity, leadership grounded in social intelligence becomes increasingly vital for promoting sustainable integration and cohesion.

Conceptual Review

A conceptual review provides a clear explanation of the major concepts under investigation in a study. This research centers around two key constructs: relationship management (the independent variable) and workers' integration (the dependent variable), which is further categorized into cultural inclusion, emotional inclusion, and economic inclusion. Each of these concepts is discussed below.

Relationship Management

Relationship management is a critical dimension of emotional intelligence, referring to a leader's ability to manage interactions constructively, foster collaboration, resolve conflict, and inspire others toward common goals (Goleman, 1998). It entails skills such as influence, clear communication, team building, conflict resolution, and mentoring.

According to Boyatzis, Goleman, and Rhee (2000), relationship management helps leaders translate social awareness into effective action, allowing them to build and maintain healthy work relationships. In organizational settings, especially those marked by diversity and high interdependence, the ability to maintain productive and respectful relationships among employees is crucial for performance and cohesion.

In the context of plastic manufacturing firms, where production relies on coordinated teamwork, strong relationship management from leaders can help reduce workplace tension, build mutual

respect, and foster a collaborative atmosphere. This, in turn, supports employees in feeling integrated into the social and functional structure of the organization.

Workers' Integration

Workers' integration refers to the extent to which employees feel included, accepted, and fully involved in the social, cultural, and economic fabric of an organization. Mor Barak (2005) defines inclusion as an individual's perception that they are part of the organizational system and processes, which aligns closely with the idea of integration.

In this study, workers' integration is viewed through three major dimensions:

Cultural Inclusion

Cultural inclusion involves recognizing and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds, identities, and values that employees bring to the workplace. Shore et al. (2011) assert that when workers perceive that their culture is respected and valued, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and loyalty to the organization. Leaders with strong relational skills are more effective at fostering culturally inclusive environments by promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and non-discriminatory practices.

Emotional Inclusion

Emotional inclusion refers to the psychological safety and emotional well-being of employees. When workers feel emotionally supported, respected, and heard, they are more likely to engage and contribute meaningfully to organizational goals (Bar-On, 2006). Leaders who practice relationship management often demonstrate empathy, open communication, and trust-building behaviors that enhance emotional connection among employees.

Economic Inclusion

Economic inclusion addresses fair and equitable access to financial and developmental opportunities within the workplace. This includes equal pay, promotion, training, and involvement in decision-making (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Leaders who manage relationships well are often better advocates for fairness and equity, which strengthens trust and employee commitment.

The central thrust of this study lies in understanding how relationship management, as a leadership behavior, contributes to workers' integration in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. Grounded in Social Intelligence Theory (Thorndike, 1920), the study interprets how leaders' interpersonal competence influences workers' experiences of cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion. Thorndike defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage people and to act wisely in human relations" (p. 228), a concept directly applicable to leadership contexts where relational effectiveness shapes outcomes like trust, satisfaction, and belonging. Goleman (1998) also highlights relationship management as a core dimension of emotional intelligence, involving behaviors such as conflict resolution, collaboration, and team cohesion—all critical to creating inclusive work environments.

Workers' integration, conceptualized as cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion, reflects how well employees are accepted and involved in an organization's systems (Mor Barak, 2005; Shore et al., 2011). Leaders with strong relationship management skills, exhibiting socially intelligent behavior, foster inclusion by recognizing diversity (Nkomo & Cox, 1996), providing psychological safety and empathy (Bar-On, 2006), and ensuring equity and transparency in economic decisions. Thus, Social Intelligence Theory offers a robust theoretical foundation for linking leadership behaviors to employee integration, reinforcing the study's relevance and focus.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have highlighted the role of leadership behaviors—particularly relationship management—in shaping inclusive work environments. As organizations become more dynamic and people-focused, the emphasis on social competencies in leadership has grown. This review discusses select empirical studies that shed light on how relationship management influences various dimensions of workers' integration, especially cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion.

A foundational work by Shore et al. (2011) developed an influential model of inclusion in diverse work groups. Their research demonstrated that inclusive leadership behaviors—such as fairness, openness, and supportive communication—are significantly associated with greater emotional and cultural inclusion among employees. Leaders who demonstrate empathy and maintain high-quality interpersonal relationships foster environments where workers feel psychologically safe, respected, and connected. This supports the idea that relationship management is a key driver of social integration, especially in settings with diverse or segmented teams.

Closer to the Nigerian context, Adegbite and Oluwafemi (2019) investigated the relationship between leadership style and workers' inclusion in the public sector. Their findings revealed a strong correlation between relational leadership approaches—those emphasizing interpersonal understanding, dialogue, and shared decision-making—and workers' sense of cultural and emotional belonging. The study concluded that leaders who actively manage relationships and resolve interpersonal tensions contribute to a more cohesive, integrated workforce. Their recommendation for adopting people-oriented leadership styles aligns with the central idea of this study: that relationship management fosters a stronger sense of unity and participation among employees.

Similarly, Chinomnso and Eze (2020) examined leadership communication and employee integration in medium-scale enterprises across Southeastern Nigeria. Their study found that transparent, empathetic, and two-way communication—core aspects of relationship management—were significant predictors of both cultural and emotional integration. Employees who felt heard and valued by their leaders were more likely to identify with organizational goals and cooperate with diverse teams. The research emphasized the importance of conflict

resolution, trust-building, and relational leadership behaviors as enablers of inclusion in culturally mixed work environments.

Despite these relevant findings, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, a sector and location that face unique workforce challenges such as high labor turnover, informal practices, and weak employee relations. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how relationship management, as a dimension of emotional intelligence, predicts cultural, emotional, and economic inclusion among workers in this context.

From the foregoing, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between leaders' relationship management and workers' cultural inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between leaders' relationship management and workers' emotional inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between leaders' relationship management and workers' economic inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a correlational survey research design. The design supports the study's non-experimental and explanatory nature. A survey strategy was employed to collect primary data from employees in selected plastic manufacturing firms (no less than five years in practice). This strategy facilitates wide coverage and helps gather standardized responses for statistical analysis. The research also used a cross-sectional time horizon, capturing data at a single point in time to reflect current organizational dynamics. The study was conducted in a non-contrived (natural) setting, meaning the researcher does not manipulate variables or create artificial conditions. Instead, data is gathered from employees in their usual workplace environments within plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The population comprised 700 employees from selected plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. The sample size of 255 was determined using the Taro Yamane's (1967) formula. Content validity will be ensured through expert review by academic professionals in management and organizational behavior. Reliability of the instrument will be tested through a pilot study using Cronbach's Alpha, with a reliability threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable. To test the stated hypotheses and evaluate the strength and direction of relationships between the predictor and criterion variables, Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient (ρ) will be employed.

Table 1: Spearman’s Correlation Benchmark

Correlation Coefficient (r _s)	Strength of Relationship	Interpretation
±0.90 – ±1.00	Very Strong	Very strong positive/negative relationship
±0.70 – ±0.89	Strong	Strong positive/negative relationship
±0.40 – ±0.69	Moderate	Moderate positive/negative relationship
±0.10 – ±0.39	Weak	Weak positive/negative relationship
0.00	None	No relationship

Mukaka, M. M. (2012)

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 2: Relationship Management and Workers Integration

Variables	Correlation (rho)	Sig. (p-value)	Strength of Relationship
Relationship Management & Cultural Inclusion	0.787	0.000	Strong, positive, significant
Relationship Management & Economic Inclusion	0.814	0.000	Strongest, positive, significant
Relationship Management & Emotional Inclusion	0.768	0.000	Strong, positive, significant

Source; SPSS Output version 25.0

The Spearman’s correlation results in Table 2 reveals that relationship management by leaders is strongly and positively related to all three dimensions of workers’ integration — cultural, economic, and emotional inclusion — in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. The highest correlation was found between relationship management and economic inclusion (r = .814, p < .01), suggesting that effective relationship practices from leadership are most strongly

reflected in how workers feel economically integrated within the organization. This is closely followed by cultural inclusion ($r = .787$) and emotional inclusion ($r = .768$), also showing strong and significant associations.

The research question thus, what is the relationship between relationship-management and workers integration in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt? Table 2 shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the predictor and criterion variables as shown in the hypotheses below.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between relationship management and cultural inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

Table 2 discloses that there is a significant strong positive relationship between relationship management and cultural inclusion. The relationship indicates a correlational R-value of 0.787 with a P-value < 0.05 . This implies that relationship management has a strong positive influence on cultural inclusion, therefore the null hypothesis rejected and the alternate accepted and alternate rejected.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between relationship management and economic inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

The result on table 2 revealed that there is a very strong positive relationship between the two variables. The relationship indicates a correlational R value of 0.814 with a P value < 0.05 . Therefore, this implies that relationship management has a very strong positive influence on economic inclusion.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between relationship management and emotional inclusion in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. The result on table 2 revealed a strong positive correlation between the two variables as the relationship indicates a correlational R-value of 0.768 at p value < 0.05 . This implies that relationship management has a positive strong influence on emotional inclusion

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study demonstrate a significant and positive relationship between relationship management and the three dimensions of workers' integration—namely cultural inclusion, emotional inclusion, and economic inclusion—in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. These findings offer compelling support for the premise that leaders' ability to effectively manage relationships plays a central role in fostering inclusive workplaces.

Firstly, the study revealed a strong positive relationship between relationship management and cultural inclusion. This implies that leaders who demonstrate respect for diversity, promote open communication, and foster mutual understanding are more likely to create environments where employees from diverse cultural backgrounds feel accepted and valued. This finding is consistent with the assertions of Mor Barak (2015), who emphasized that culturally inclusive leadership

fosters trust and engagement among employees from various backgrounds. Similarly, Cox and Blake (1991) argued that managing cultural diversity effectively enhances organizational competitiveness and promotes integration in multicultural settings.

Secondly, the study found a strong positive correlation between relationship management and emotional inclusion. Leaders who are empathetic, supportive, and emotionally aware tend to create psychologically safe spaces where employees feel emotionally connected and valued. This is supported by Goleman's (1995) framework of emotional intelligence, which identifies relationship management as a critical component of effective leadership. According to Cherniss and Goleman (2001), emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to recognize and respond to employees' emotional needs, leading to stronger bonds and higher levels of inclusion. Ashkanasy and Daus (2005) also suggest that emotionally supportive leadership correlates with increased organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions.

The study also uncovered a strong positive association between relationship management and economic inclusion. Employees are more likely to perceive fairness in pay, decision-making opportunities, and resource access when their leaders maintain open, respectful, and consultative relationships. This aligns with the findings of Nishii (2013), who argued that inclusive leadership practices influence employees' perceptions of distributive and procedural justice. Similarly, Shore et al. (2011) posited that economic inclusion—an often-overlooked aspect of workplace integration—is strongly influenced by leadership behaviors that demonstrate fairness and transparency.

Collectively, these findings affirm the critical role of relationship management in promoting holistic workers' integration—encompassing emotional, cultural, and economic aspects. This validates the position of Thorndike's (1920) Social Intelligence Theory, which conceptualizes social intelligence as the ability to understand and manage people in interpersonal relationships. In this context, leaders who possess strong social intelligence are better equipped to foster inclusivity across all dimensions of the workplace. As Boyatzis (2009) noted, socially intelligent leadership behaviors directly affect organizational climate and employees' sense of belonging and inclusion.

The implications of these findings are particularly important for organizations in the plastic manufacturing sector, where team cohesion, employee retention, and productivity are closely tied to how well workers are integrated into the workplace. By emphasizing and developing relationship management competencies among leaders, firms can enhance workplace harmony and ensure that all employees, regardless of background or status, feel seen, heard, and economically valued.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has established that relationship management, a key element of leaders' emotional intelligence, plays a significant role in enhancing workers' integration—culturally, emotionally, and economically—in plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. The findings highlight that leaders who build strong interpersonal relationships foster inclusive and supportive work environments where employees feel valued and engaged. Grounded in Thorndike's Social Intelligence Theory (1920), the study reinforces that socially intelligent leadership is crucial for effective workforce integration and organizational success. Consequently, the study recommended that plastic manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt should:

1. develop relationship management skills in leaders through targeted emotional intelligence training.
2. promote inclusive leadership practices that encourage participation across cultural and economic lines.
3. create platforms for open dialogue and feedback to enhance emotional inclusion.
4. establish clear policies that ensure equity and fairness in decision-making and resource distribution.
5. integrate social intelligence metrics into recruitment and promotion processes for leadership roles.
6. encourage cross-cultural teamwork to strengthen cultural awareness and foster inclusivity.

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