

Intercultural Dialogue as a Tool for Leadership Development: A Qualitative Single-Case Study of a Multilingual Marketing Team

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Abstract

This study explores intercultural dialogue as a strategic approach to leadership development within a bilingual marketing team at PT Danone, West Sumatra, Indonesia. Adopting a qualitative single-case study design, the research investigates how intercultural dialogue is constructed, how cultural identity is negotiated, and how patterns of self-awareness emerge among reflective leaders within a multilingual multinational organization. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analyses involving ten participants from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The analysis generated three overarching themes: (1) Dialogue as a Bridge of Meaning, demonstrating how cross-cultural communication expands mutual understanding beyond linguistic boundaries; (2) Negotiation of Cultural Identity, revealing how recruitment leaders and team members redefine their roles through empathy and reflective engagement; and (3) Leadership Through Dialogical Growth, illustrating that effective leadership evolves through collective interaction rather than hierarchical structure. The study contributes theoretically by positioning intercultural dialogue as a mechanism of leadership learning, and practically by offering insights for multinational corporations to develop reflective leadership models that are inclusive and adaptive to cultural diversity.

Keywords: *intercultural dialogue; leadership development; multilingual teams; qualitative case study, cross-cultural management*

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Introduction

Throughout the evolving dimensions of multinational organizations, diversity in cultural and linguistic understanding has become inevitable. For instance, PT Danone – a resilient multinational company operating within the global industry – faces both remarkable challenges and opportunities as it conducts operations across Indonesia, including the culturally rich region of West Sumatra. Within this context, its marketing team represents a strategic space where intercultural collaboration is continuously constructed. This environment not only facilitates cross-cultural communication in daily work interactions but also serves as a dynamic arena for learning, collaboration, and leadership development.

As market complexity increases and adaptation to local consumer preferences becomes imperative, marketing teams are required to be not only technically proficient but also culturally competent in their communication. Intercultural communication competence has thus emerged as a critical capability for

teams operating in multinational contexts. However, challenges often arise from communication gaps among team members who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These challenges may include differences in communication styles, such as high-context versus low-context communication, perceptions of authority and hierarchy, decision-making approaches, and social norms that shape workplace behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). Such dynamics frequently influence team cohesion, mutual understanding, and the overall effectiveness of leadership practices in multicultural environments

In the context of West Sumatra renowned for its Minangkabau culture characterized by egalitarianism and collectivism an intriguing dynamic emerges when these local values intersect with the global organizational culture of Danone, which emphasizes efficiency, innovation, and collaborative leadership with an international outlook. Empirical observations indicate that some local managers encounter challenges in building cohesive teams due to differing cultural orientations between local employees and expatriate supervisors. As a result, the potential for cross-cultural innovation remains underutilized, and leadership development grounded in intercultural dialogue has yet to be fully realized.

In Indonesia, previous studies have predominantly focused on cross-cultural adjustment among expatriate employees (Harahap & Siregar, 2019) or on intercultural communication within the domains of education and diplomacy (Rachmawati, 2020). However, limited attention has been given to how intercultural dialogue can be utilized as a strategic tool for developing cross-cultural leadership competence within multilingual and multicultural teams. This gap highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how intercultural dialogue contributes to the construction of organizational culture and the evolution of leadership practices in multinational work environments.

As a multinational corporation, PT Danone operates an extensive production and distribution network across Indonesia, including the West Sumatra region, where its organizational structure involves multilingual teams communicating in Bahasa Indonesia, English, and occasionally local dialects. At the managerial and marketing levels, these teams engage with a wide range of stakeholders from local consumers to global partners within complex and dynamic cultural contexts. In this setting, intercultural dialogue becomes a central mechanism for fostering effective communication, minimizing misunderstandings, and strengthening cross-cultural team cohesion. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore how intercultural dialogue functions as a tool for leadership development in a multilingual marketing team at PT Danone, West Sumatra. The research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on intercultural leadership by providing both theoretical insights and practical implications for multinational organizations operating within culturally diverse environment.

However, interviews conducted with several members of the marketing team revealed that cross-cultural communication often remains transactional rather than transformational. Interactions are primarily centered on the delivery of instructions and work coordination rather than on the exchange of meanings and reflection of cultural values. Consequently, the process of leadership learning through intercultural interaction has not been fully realized. This condition underscores the need for a new conceptual model that positions intercultural dialogue not merely as a communication strategy, but as a strategic instrument for leadership development in multicultural organizational settings.

This study offers both conceptual and empirical novelty. Conceptually, it positions intercultural dialogue as a tool for leadership development rather than merely as a dimension of intercultural communication. By doing so, the study shifts the analytical focus from “how people communicate across cultures” to “how intercultural dialogue shapes leadership capacity.” Empirically, this research applies

a qualitative single-case study approach within a global organizational context specifically, a multilingual marketing team at PT Danone, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The study seeks to identify the mechanisms, dynamics, and lived practices through which intercultural dialogue unfolds in team interactions, and how these processes contribute to the emergence of collaborative, reflective, and diversity-oriented leadership

Accordingly, this study is significant as it offers new insights into how leaders and team members learn through intercultural interactions. It provides practical contributions for multinational corporations in Indonesia by informing the design of leadership training strategies grounded in intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, it addresses a notable gap in the literature concerning intercultural practices within the Indonesian context particularly in the business and marketing sectors where studies of this nature remain limited. Through this contribution, the research aims to enhance both theoretical understanding and applied practices of intercultural leadership development in culturally diverse organizational environments.

Literature Review

Intercultural Dialogue and the Multicultural Work Environment

Intercultural dialogue refers to the process of mutual understanding and the exchange of perspectives among individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds (Council, 2008). It extends beyond mere communication to encompass reflective and empathetic engagement, enabling the creation of shared understanding and appreciation of cultural differences (Bennett, 2013; Isaacs, 2018). Within organizational settings, intercultural dialogue functions as a bridge that connects the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

In multinational corporations such as PT Danone, which employs individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, this diversity introduces unique complexities in communication, coordination, and collaboration processes. Marketing teams, in particular, represent highly intensive sites of intercultural interaction. In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia, language is not only a medium of communication but also a symbol of identity and power (Vaara et al., 2005). Previous studies have highlighted that intercultural dialogue can serve as a means of fostering shared understanding and collective goals within multicultural teams (Kassis Henderson, 2019).

However, direct empirical evidence linking intercultural dialogue to leadership development in multilingual team contexts remains limited, particularly within Southeast Asia. This suggests an important research opportunity to explore how intercultural dialogue contributes to leadership learning, identity negotiation, and the co-construction of meaning in multicultural organizational environments.

Leadership Development in Multicultural Contexts

The concept of leadership development has evolved from traditional hierarchical approaches toward relational and dialogical paradigms (Day, 2000; Nick, 2014). Contemporary leadership theories such as transformational, servant, and adaptive leadership emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence, cross-cultural sensitivity, and the ability to adapt to diversity (Goleman et al., 2013). Within global organizations, leadership development is increasingly understood not merely as an enhancement of individual competencies but as a collective social process that emerges through interaction, shared reflection, and mutual learning (Drath et al., 2008).

This perspective aligns with the notion of dialogical leadership, which views leadership as emerging through dialogical interactions among organizational members (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). In multicultural teams, dialogical leadership plays a crucial role in creating spaces for reflection, accommodating value differences, and integrating diverse perspectives into collective strength. However, most previous studies have tended to view dialogue merely as a communicative activity rather than as a strategic instrument for leadership development. This conceptual gap serves as the foundational premise of the present study.

Intercultural Communication Competence and Global Leadership

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). ICC encompasses three core dimensions: cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitude), and behavioral (skills). Previous studies have shown that ICC is positively associated with global leadership effectiveness, highlighting the importance of cultural intelligence and adaptive communication in diverse organizational settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2015; Bussmann et al., 2020)

Nevertheless, many existing ICC models remain static, often grounded in rigid categorizations of culture. In practice, however, culture is dynamic and continuously shaped through everyday dialogical interactions (Gale et al., 2020). Within multilingual marketing teams, where language use influences identity and relational positioning, the development of intercultural competence cannot be separated from ongoing intercultural dialogue practices.

This study is grounded in the perspective that intercultural dialogue functions as a developmental process through which intercultural competence and leadership capability can be cultivated simultaneously. In other words, leaders learn not only about other cultures but through intercultural experiences that unfold within their teams.

The Role of Language in Multilingual Teams

Linguistic diversity in multinational organizations can serve as both a source of strength and a potential source of tension. Research in international business communication has emphasized that language policies and practices significantly influence collaboration, trust, and the legitimacy of leadership (Frederiks et al., 2024). When English is adopted as the primary corporate language, disparities in participation often arise between team members with high linguistic proficiency and those who are less fluent (Neeley, 2013).

In the Indonesian context, this situation becomes even more complex due to the coexistence of multiple languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, English, and local languages such as Minangkabau. This linguistic plurality demands leaders to cultivate dialogical sensitivity toward both linguistic and cultural dimensions. Leaders who manage language diversity with empathy and reflective awareness are better equipped to foster an inclusive communication climate and strengthen team cohesion (Tange, 2010).

Hence, the key to effective leadership in multilingual teams does not lie solely in linguistic fluency, but rather in the ability to engage in dialogue across languages and cultures. This perspective situates intercultural dialogue as a central competency for building trust, equity, and shared understanding within linguistically diverse organizational settings.

Organizational Learning and Intercultural Dialogue

Organizational learning theory (Argyris, 1996) posits that organizations learn when their members engage in reflection and dialogue based on shared experiences. Within multicultural teams, intercultural dialogue functions as a mechanism of double-loop learning a process that not only corrects behaviors but also reexamines underlying assumptions and core values (Su et al., 2025). Through dialogical engagement, team members can broaden their perspectives, challenge ethnocentric biases, and co-create new, more adaptive ways of working.

As Isaacs (2018) asserts, “dialogue is the art of thinking together.” This collective thinking process lies at the heart of reflective and collaborative leadership development within global organizations. Intercultural dialogue, therefore, can be understood as both a pedagogical mechanism and an organizational practice that fosters reflection, empathy, and the cultivation of leadership capacities oriented toward diversity and inclusivity.

Research Gap and Conceptual Framework (Manuscript-Ready Version)

Although research on intercultural communication and global leadership has grown substantially, few empirical studies have explored how intercultural dialogue functions as a mechanism for leadership development within multilingual teams, particularly in non-Western contexts. Existing literature remains predominantly Western-centric and has paid limited attention to collectivist cultures such as Indonesia, which emphasize social harmony (gotong royong) and respect for hierarchy (Insights, 2019).

This study seeks to address this gap by proposing an integrative framework that connects three core constructs: (1) Intercultural Dialogue understood as an interactive process through which shared meaning and mutual understanding are co-constructed; (2) Leadership Development conceptualized as a social phenomenon emerging from collective interaction and reflection; and (3) Multilingual Team Context viewed as a dynamic environment where language and culture continually shape leadership experiences.

Through a qualitative single-case design, this study focuses on intercultural dialogical practices within the marketing team of PT Danone in West Sumatra and examines how these practices contribute to leadership learning. This approach aims to offer a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that leadership development in global organizations can evolve organically through intercultural dialogue rather than relying solely on formal training programs.

Based on the preceding literature, this research proposes the following conceptual proposition “Intercultural dialogue serves as a developmental mechanism that enhances reflective, empathetic, and relational leadership capacities within multilingual team interactions.”

Accordingly, leadership is understood not as a personal attribute but as a relational outcome emerging from dialogical engagement across languages and cultures. This approach bridges theories of intercultural communication and leadership development within the complex cultural environment of multinational organizations operating in Indonesia.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design. The qualitative case study method was chosen because the objective of this research is not to quantify relationships between variables, but rather to deeply understand the processes, meanings, and dynamics of intercultural dialogue within a real-world multinational organizational context. The single-case design (Yin, 2018)

was selected as PT Danone, West Sumatra Area, represents a unique bounded case where cross-cultural and multilingual interactions occur intensively within a marketing environment. The focus of this study is not on statistical generalization but on conceptual transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that is, the extent to which findings can provide conceptual insights applicable to similar multinational organizational contexts.

The research was conducted at PT Danone Indonesia, specifically in the Marketing Division of the West Sumatra Area, which comprises team members from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The unit of analysis in this study is the multilingual marketing team, which operates under the supervision of a regional manager and engages in planning, promotional, and sales coordination activities across the West Sumatra region. This team was chosen because it consists of members from various cultural backgrounds (Minangkabau, Javanese, Batak, and expatriate staff) and uses multiple languages Bahasa Indonesia, English, and occasionally local dialects making it a dynamic interface between Danone's global strategies and the local market context of Indonesia.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) based on three criteria: (1) being an active member or manager within the West Sumatra marketing team, (2) engaging in daily cross-cultural and multilingual interactions at work, and (3) voluntarily agreeing to participate and provide reflective insights. A total of ten participants were involved, consisting of one Regional Manager (expatriate, non-Indonesian), two Area Managers (from different Indonesian cultural backgrounds), four local marketing staff, and three supporting employees (customer relations and sales support). This composition ensured sufficient representation of cross-cultural dialogical experiences across managerial and operational levels.

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, limited participatory observation, and internal document analysis. These methods were triangulated to ensure data validity and to capture both individual perceptions and team-level interactions in understanding how intercultural dialogue contributes to leadership learning within a multilingual organizational setting.

In depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format guided by a flexible interview protocol that allowed for the exploration of participants' meanings and reflections. The questions focused on experiences of cross-cultural interaction within the team, everyday communication practices and language use, situations that triggered challenges or leadership learning, and participants' perceptions of the role of dialogue in shaping workplace relationships and leadership practices.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting convenient for the participants. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and richness of the data.

Limited Participatory Observation

The researcher conducted limited participatory observations during team meetings and marketing coordination activities over a four-week period. The observations focused on patterns of verbal and non-verbal interaction, instances of language switching (code-switching) within team communication, and leadership responses or strategies in addressing cultural differences and communication-related tensions.

Daily field notes were systematically compiled to document contextual elements, expressions, and non-linguistic dynamics observed during interactions. These notes provided complementary data that enriched the interpretation of interview findings and offered a deeper understanding of how intercultural dialogue was practiced and manifested in the team's day-to-day operations.

Document Analysis and Data Analysis

Internal company documents such as corporate communication guidelines, codes of conduct, and team activity reports were analyzed to understand the organizational context and policies related to cross-cultural communication. These secondary data sources served as triangulation materials to complement and validate the findings from interviews and observations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis grounded in a dialogical theoretical framework (Braun & Luckmann, 2006). This approach enabled the identification of meaning patterns emerging from intercultural interactions within the team. The analysis followed six iterative stages:

1. Familiarization with the data: rereading interview transcripts and observation notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the context.
2. Initial coding: labeling meaningful units related to the research focus (e.g., “cross-cultural reflection,” “communication tension,” “multilingual collaboration”).
3. Theme identification: grouping codes into preliminary themes such as “dialogue as a bridge of meaning,” “negotiation of cultural identity,” and “reflective leadership.”
4. Theme review: examining coherence between data and themes, and refining or removing overlapping categories.
5. Theme definition and naming: developing comprehensive thematic descriptions linking empirical data to the theoretical perspective of intercultural dialogue.
6. Analytical narrative construction: synthesizing relationships among themes to explain how intercultural dialogue functions as a mechanism for leadership development.

To ensure systematic organization and traceability, all coding and thematic mapping processes were supported using NVivo 14 software.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, four criteria were applied following Lincoln and Guba (1985): (1) credibility, achieved through member checking with participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents; (2) transferability, established by providing thick contextual descriptions to enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings; (3) dependability, maintained through the development of a detailed audit trail documenting data collection procedures, analytical decisions, and the researcher’s reflective notes; and (4) confirmability, ensured by maintaining a reflexive research journal that recorded the researcher’s positionality and potential biases to preserve interpretive objectivity.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles of social research as outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) and the Indonesian Social Research Ethics Committee. Several ethical measures were implemented to ensure the integrity and protection of participants: (1) informed consent, whereby all participants were provided with written explanations regarding the research objectives, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence; (2) confidentiality and anonymity, ensured by anonymizing names and professional roles using participant codes (e.g., “P1,” “M2”) to protect individual privacy; (3) transparency and integrity, maintained through the absence of data manipulation or coercion, with all interpretations derived solely from verified empirical evidence; and (4) organizational permission, obtained through formal written approval from the management of PT Danone Indonesia to conduct observations and interviews within the workplace.

Analytical Framework

Based on the research approach and objectives, this study employed the Dialogical Model of Intercultural Leadership Development, which consists of three analytical stages: (1) Dialogue as an Interactive Process understanding how team members communicate, share meaning, and navigate cultural differences; (2) Dialogue as a Reflective Process exploring how individuals interpret cross-cultural experiences as opportunities for leadership learning; and (3) Dialogue as a Transformative Process identifying changes in mindset, behavior, and relational patterns of leadership that emerge from intercultural dialogical experiences.

Summary of Methodology

The methodological framework of this study is illustrated in the following figure, providing an overview of the entire research process from problem formulation and conceptual framework development to data analysis and conclusion drawing. This framework serves as a conceptual guide to understanding the researcher's reasoning process and ensures that each phase of the study can be followed systematically and coherently. The visualization of this framework highlights the logical progression of the research design and its alignment with the study's objectives, thereby reinforcing methodological transparency and analytical consistency.

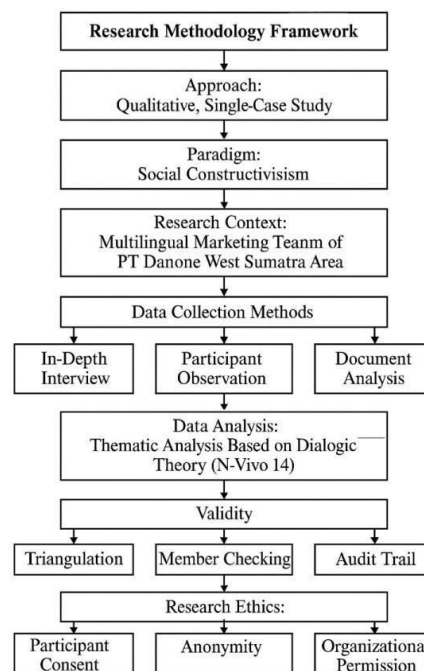


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Results and Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, observational field notes, and organizational documents, three overarching themes were identified that explain how intercultural dialogue contributes to leadership development within the multilingual marketing team of PT Danone, West Sumatra Area. These themes are: (1) Dialogue as a Bridge of Meaning, (2) Negotiating Cultural Identity, and (3) Emergent Leadership through Dialogue.

Dialogue as a Bridge of Meaning

The first theme illustrates how intercultural dialogue within the team functions as a bridge to overcome differences in meaning, values, and communication styles. In the context of Danone's multilingual team, dialogue was not merely a tool for transmitting information but a collective process of aligning perceptions and constructing shared goals.

One participant reflected on this experience "Sometimes we have very different ways of speaking. The expatriates tend to be more direct, while we are used to being more polite. But after frequent discussions and asking each other's intentions, we eventually understood that being direct doesn't mean being angry or harsh it's just a communication style." (P3, Local Marketing Staff)

This narrative demonstrates how dialogue enables team members to deconstruct intercultural assumptions and stereotypes, fostering new understandings of intent behind diverse expressions. In Bennett's (2013) theory of intercultural dialogue, this process is known as decentring the ability to step outside one's own cultural frame of reference to comprehend that of others. Through this process, team members learn not only to translate words but also to interpret underlying cultural meanings and values.

Observations from coordination meetings revealed a gradual shift in communication style from predominantly instructive interactions to more participatory and reflective exchanges. Dialogue thus served as a form of social learning, enabling team members to build mutual understanding and strengthen trust. This finding supports (Deardorff & Jones, 2023) assertion that intercultural dialogue transcends linguistic exchange and represents a transformative process that deepens intercultural awareness and enhances leadership sensitivity.

Negotiating Cultural Identity

The second theme illustrates how team members negotiated their cultural identities in everyday work interactions. Within a workplace composed of local Minangkabau employees, workers from other Indonesian provinces, and expatriate managers, cultural identity was not static but continuously negotiated through dialogical engagement.

One area manager explained "When I first moved to Padang, I found it difficult to adjust. The culture here is more egalitarian everyone wants to be heard. But after a few months, I learned that giving others a voice actually strengthens the team rather than diminishing my authority." (P5, Area Manager – Javanese)

This reflection demonstrates an adaptive process of intercultural leadership identity, in which leaders learn to align their leadership styles with local cultural norms without compromising professionalism. Such negotiations occur informally through daily interactions rather than formal training programs. This finding aligns with relational leadership theory (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), which views leadership as an emergent outcome of ongoing social relationships rather than a fixed individual attribute.

In the context of PT Danone, these identity negotiations created reflective spaces for intercultural dialogue, where team members not only collaborated but also learned to understand and value different ways of thinking and behaving. Furthermore, the observed use of code-switching during meetings reflected an adaptive communication strategy to balance local familiarity with global clarity. For instance, team members often used English for technical terms but switched to Bahasa Indonesia or local dialects to express emotional nuances and strengthen social closeness.

This phenomenon supports the argument of Vaara et al. (2005) that language serves a symbolic function in negotiating power and identity within multinational organizations. In this setting, dialogue becomes an arena for negotiating leadership legitimacy and team membership across cultural boundaries, highlighting the interdependence between linguistic practice, identity formation, and intercultural leadership learning.

Emergent Leadership through Dialogue

The third theme reveals that leadership within the multilingual team emerged organically through dialogical processes rather than being dictated by formal hierarchical structures. One participant described this dynamic vividly “In meetings, it’s not always the supervisor who leads the discussion, but whoever best understands the local context or has the right idea. We give each other space to speak. In those moments, I feel that everyone has the chance to become a leader.” (P7, Senior Marketing Staff)

This account reflects the concept of emergent leadership a form of leadership that arises naturally from social interaction and collective engagement (Drath et al., 2008). The process demonstrates how intercultural dialogue provides reflective and participatory spaces in which team members can develop collaborative leadership competencies.

Observational data indicated the presence of rotational leadership practices, where decision-making responsibilities shifted informally depending on the context and expertise of team members. For example, when discussions involved the local market in West Sumatra, local staff tended to assume more dominant roles, while expatriates often acted as facilitators. This fluid exchange of leadership roles reflects an adaptive and dialogical form of governance, grounded in mutual respect and situational awareness.

These findings confirm that intercultural dialogue can serve as a mechanism for collective leadership learning, consistent with the notion of learning leadership through interaction (Day, 2000). Within PT Danone’s multilingual marketing team, leadership was not taught but cultivated developed through reflective practice, active listening, and openness to difference. Dialogue thus becomes both the medium and outcome of leadership learning, fostering a culture of shared growth and adaptive collaboration.

Thematic Synthesis and Conceptual Model

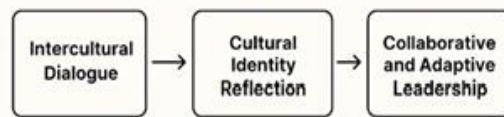
The synthesis of the three themes demonstrates that intercultural dialogue functions as a mechanism for reflective leadership development through three dynamic and interrelated stages: understanding, reflection, and transformation.

Understanding represents the dialogical process of building bridges of meaning where team members engage in sense-making to overcome differences in cultural interpretation and communication style. Reflection captures how individuals negotiate their cultural and leadership identities in cross-cultural contexts, leading to deeper awareness of relational dynamics. Finally, transformation reflects the emergence of collective leadership characterized by empathy, collaboration, and adaptability to diversity.

Conceptually, these stages form the Dialogical Model of Intercultural Leadership Development, in which leadership evolves through iterative cycles of intercultural engagement. Dialogue operates simultaneously as a communicative act, a reflective learning process, and a transformative experience. Through this process, leadership becomes a shared, relational, and adaptive practice rather than a hierarchical or positional attribute.

The conceptual model below summarizes the process identified in this study:

Model for Leadership Development



This model shows that leadership development in a multilingual context is not only the result of formal training, but rather the result of ongoing reflective interactions and social learning in the work environment.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

This research broadens the understanding of cross-cultural leadership by:

Positioning cross-cultural dialogue as a mechanism for reflective leadership development rather than merely a communication strategy; Demonstrating that leadership can emerge from dialogic social practices, consistent with the relational leadership paradigm (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011); and Integrating intercultural competence theory (Deardorff & Jones, 2023) with organizational learning (Argyris, 1996) to explain how leadership learning occurs through cross-cultural reflection.

Practical Implications

For multinational organizations like PT Danone, the results of this study provide strategic recommendations: Develop leadership programs based on intercultural dialogue, not just technical training. Encourage cross-regional and cross-cultural rotation as part of the leadership learning process. Facilitate collective reflection spaces such as learning circles or dialogue sessions to internalize the values of inclusivity and cross-cultural empathy. Overall, the results of this study indicate that intercultural dialogue has great potential as a leadership development tool in multinational organizations. Through the process of understanding, reflection, and transformation, team members not only overcome cultural differences but also develop a more adaptive, collaborative, and empathetic leadership identity. Thus, this case study confirms that sustainable leadership in the global era is not the result of formal instruction or training, but rather the result of a lively dialogue across differences.

Conclusions

This study aims to understand how intercultural dialogue functions as a tool for leadership development within a multilingual marketing team at PT Danone, West Sumatra Area. Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and organizational documents, three key findings emerged that form the foundation of this research.

First, intercultural dialogue acts as a bridge of meaning, enabling team members to reinterpret differences in communication styles, values, and work norms. Through mutual questioning and meaning negotiation, the team successfully transformed differences into a source of social learning, thereby strengthening interpersonal cohesion.

Second, dialogue serves as a space for negotiating cultural identity, where both local and expatriate team members adjust their leadership and communication styles to fit the local socio-cultural context. This process fosters reflective awareness of individual cultural positions and enhances cross-cultural adaptability.

Third, leadership emerged organically through dialogic processes. Open and reflective communication practices allowed leadership roles to shift according to situational competence rather than formal hierarchy. Consequently, leadership is understood as a dynamic social process shaped through intercultural and multilingual interactions.

The study introduces a Dialogic Model of Intercultural Leadership Development consisting of three stages: (1) dialogue as understanding to overcome misunderstandings and build shared meaning; (2) dialogue as reflection to negotiate cultural identities and leadership roles; and (3) dialogue as transformation to foster collaborative and adaptive leadership. Conceptually, this research reconceptualizes intercultural dialogue as a mechanism for leadership development by integrating relational leadership theory (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and double-loop learning (Argyris, 1996), while highlighting the importance of non-Western perspectives through local values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation), Minangkabau egalitarianism, and Indonesian collectivism.

Practically, the study offers leadership development strategies through dialogue-based training, cross-cultural rotation, the establishment of reflection spaces, and inclusive multilingual communication. Although limited by a single context and a small number of participants, this research opens opportunities for future multi-case and mixed-method studies, as well as exploration of technology's role and intergenerational dynamics.

Overall, the findings affirm that intercultural dialogue is not merely a communication medium but a reflective, participatory, and transformative mechanism for leadership learning fostering inclusive, humane, and sustainable global leadership. Further research should explore intercultural leadership development in other non-Western societies to examine whether locally embedded cultural values influence dialogical leadership processes differently, thereby contributing to a more globally inclusive theory of leadership development

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