



Building Cross-Cultural Consensus: Educational Leadership Challenges in a German Sustainability-Focused Institution

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A B S T R A C T

While existing cross-cultural management literature is well-established in corporate settings, a research gap remains regarding how senior leaders in international educational organizations navigate strategic consensus-building, and whether standard national-culture frameworks adequately explain these dynamics. Addressing this gap, this qualitative, single-case exploratory study investigates the challenges senior leaders face in building cross-cultural consensus at a sustainability-focused unit of an internationally accredited business school in Germany. Using purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three senior leaders from Germany, Colombia, and Croatia. The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically. Seven interrelated themes emerged: cultural diversity as a strategic asset versus a source requiring individual adjustment; the salience of individual over national-cultural differences; tension between hierarchical control and horizontal aspiration in priority-setting; persistent but manageable language barriers; uneven representation in senior decision-making; resistance to change addressed through incremental dialogue; and trust-building through informal relationship development. A recurring cross-cutting finding was that, within this case, participants perceived individual and organizational factors as more salient than national-cultural differences in shaping strategic consensus-building. This study contributes to cross-cultural educational leadership research by providing empirical evidence that qualifies the explanatory sufficiency of national-culture frameworks when applied to individual senior-leader behavior, while also offering actionable strategies for leading diverse academic teams.

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1. Introduction

Developing consensus around strategic priorities is a persistent organizational challenge, and this challenge intensifies in cross-cultural contexts, where stakeholders hold differing values, communication norms, and decision-making preferences (Dunn & Craig, 2023; Nasr, 2026). As organizations expand internationally, leaders increasingly must reconcile diverse cultural perspectives when setting strategic direction (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Brandt et al., 2022).

Cultural-values research offers one explanation for why this is difficult. Hofstede's (2001) dimensions, power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and related constructs, are widely used to explain why consensus-building is often slower and more contested in culturally diverse groups. Meanwhile, high- versus low-context communication norms (Hall, 1976; Houdek, 2023) shape how directly disagreement is expressed across cultures. Multicultural-team research shows a parallel pattern: diversity can enrich decision-making but also generate early process losses if not actively managed (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Stahl et al., 2010).



These explanatory mechanisms are not interchangeable. Values-based accounts explain friction as a function of differing underlying priorities; communication-based accounts explain friction as a function of how meaning is transmitted; and team-process accounts explain friction as an emergent property of group composition. This manuscript keeps these three mechanisms analytically distinct rather than treating cultural differences as a single undifferentiated cause (Khan & Usman, 2025).

Existing research is reasonably consistent in showing that culture affects consensus-building; however, this literature is considerably less developed regarding how this plays out among senior leaders specifically, and within international educational institutions. Multinational corporate settings dominate the empirical base (Brett et al., 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). In contrast, international educational institutions, which combine faculty, staff, and student stakeholder groups under governance norms distinct from corporate settings, remain comparatively underexamined (Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Bourgeois et al., 2025).

Two specific areas remain underexamined even where the broader cultural-differences literature is well established. First, it is unclear how senior leaders in international educational organizations themselves describe navigating cultural difference specifically in the process of reaching strategic agreement, as distinct from day-to-day team collaboration. Second, it is uncertain whether the standard national-culture explanatory frame holds at the level of individual senior leaders with extensive international experience, or whether individual and organizational factors dominate instead. Whether national-cultural explanations remain sufficiently informative at the level of internationally experienced senior leaders therefore remains an open empirical question.

Addressing these gaps, this study's novelty is threefold: empirically, it provides first-hand senior-leader accounts of consensus-building; contextually, it does so within an international educational organization rather than a corporate multinational; and analytically, it interrogates the tension between individual and national-cultural differences. Theoretically, the study advances a modest qualification of national-culture explanations of consensus-building, grounded in what senior leaders themselves report. Practically, it offers leaders of similar international educational organizations concrete guidance on communication, representation, and trust-building.

This research focuses on a sustainability-focused unit of an internationally accredited business school in Germany that has undergone substantial international expansion and now operates across multiple campuses. This unit constitutes an information-rich case because its stakeholder base comprises students, faculty, and corporate partners spanning worldwide. This requires the leadership team to negotiate strategic priorities that balance local German institutional norms with global market demands.

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The research question aims to understand the key challenges faced specifically in this case context. The objectives then break down the different aspects of those challenges that this study seeks to clarify ranging from cultural viewpoints, styles, and factors to organizational and process improvement insights.

RQ: What challenges do key management leaders face when building cross-cultural consensus around strategic priorities and initiatives?

- To identify the cultural differences and divergent perspectives senior leaders encounter when setting strategic priorities.
- In order to examine how these differences manifest in communication and decision-making practices.
- As to explore how relationship-building, trust, and cultural understanding help or fail to help overcome consensus challenges.
- To derive practical recommendations for strategic planning and priority-setting in culturally diverse educational organizations.

Research gap: Cultural differences and their organizational effects are well established (Hofstede et al., 2010), but their specific manifestation in strategic consensus-building processes, at the senior-leadership level, in educational institutions, is not (Nasr, 2026).

Practical importance: Findings offer first-hand, transferable guidance for leaders of similarly structured international educational organizations facing comparable strategic-alignment challenges (Adler & Gundersen, 2008; Parker & McEvoy, 1993).

Contribution: The study advances a modest theoretical qualification of national-culture explanations of consensus-building, grounded in what senior leaders themselves report.

Broader relevance: As globalization increases the frequency with which organizations must build strategic consensus across cultural lines (Sharfman & Dean, 1991), understanding this process in one well-documented case contributes incrementally to a broader, cumulative literature (Gannon, 2004).

The main scope of this research is around cross-cultural consensus building challenges experienced by key leaders at the unit. To conduct this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior management figures to gain an in-depth view of these difficulties from those directly involved in strategic decision-making processes (Cassell & Symon, 2004).

As for limitations, while the insights collected from interviewing key informants can provide valuable contextual understandings, the views represent a limited number of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Further research engaging additional stakeholders may reveal other views. Therefore, the findings will also be specific to the context of this single case study organization, limiting broader generalizability (Yin, 2018). In addition to that, cultural variations between regions and departments are also complex constructs that cannot be fully captured within the scope of this study (Hofstede et al., 2010). Bearing in mind that communication barriers or differing interpretations during interviews also introduce some subjectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Literature Review

Cross-Cultural Consensus in Strategic Management

Building consensus across cultural boundaries has become increasingly central to strategic management as organizations expand internationally and must integrate the perspectives of culturally diverse stakeholders into decision-making (Bartlett & Ghoshal,

2000; Kun et al., 2025). The costs of failing to do so are well documented: lack of agreement on strategic direction produces inefficiency, poor coordination, and dissatisfaction among cultural subgroups (Ghoshal & Westney, 1993; Nasr, 2026), and initiatives that do not account for cultural viewpoints risk resistance or incomplete buy-in (Bhowmik et al., 2026). Conversely, consensus achieved with cultural input tends to produce more coherent and sustainable strategy on a global scale (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1991; Bourgeois et al., 2025) and strengthens cross-border commitment by giving diverse voices a stake in the outcome (Adler & Gundersen, 2008).

Culture and Team Process

Much of the applied literature approaches this problem through the lens of multicultural team management rather than senior-leadership consensus-building specifically. This literature establishes that diverse teams initially face process losses from reduced cohesion (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000) but that these can be offset through deliberate management: clear communication practices (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001), trust-building that explicitly acknowledges cultural differences in expression (Brett et al., 2006; Nasr, 2026), and structured opportunities for participative decision-making (Stahl et al., 2010). Senior-leadership consensus-building differs from team collaboration in at least one important respect: senior leaders typically hold more individual decision authority and more accumulated cross-cultural experience than junior team members, which may change how much national-cultural values actually predict their behaviour, a point this study's findings speak to directly (see Section 4.2).

Culture and Communication

Communication research treats cross-cultural interaction as a matter of message transmission and interpretation rather than underlying values per se. High- and low-context differences (Hall, 1976) mean that identical behaviour, a direct question, for instance, can be read as appropriately efficient in one cultural frame and as impolite in another (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). Cultural sensitivity and awareness reduce, but do not eliminate, this source of friction (Shockley-Zalabak, 2002; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012; Chun & Shaw, 2025). More recent work extends this to specific organizational harms: McWilliams and Gao (2025) examine how unaddressed cultural friction in communication can manifest as perceived microaggression in multinational enterprises.

Culture and Decision-Making

Applied to decision-making specifically, individualist orientations favour autonomy and personal goals in choices, while collectivist orientations favour group cohesion and social harmony, with consensus-oriented cultures typically requiring longer, more iterative deliberation to reach agreement (Hofstede, 2001). This creates a specific tension for senior leaders trying to align stakeholders from both orientations: what reads as appropriately thorough consensus-building to one party may read as inefficient delay to another (McWilliams & Gao, 2025).

Limitations of National-Culture Frameworks

While national-level cultural frameworks, such as Hofstede's dimensions, provide a useful macro-level lens, national-level frameworks may have limited explanatory precision when applied directly to individual-level behavior. Applying broad national dimensions to senior leaders with extensive international experience risks ecological fallacy, as individual dispositions, professional backgrounds, and specific organizational contexts often moderate

culturally derived values. Consequently, scholars argue for more nuanced, context-specific approaches when examining strategic behavior in multicultural teams (Pisani et al., 2017).

Leadership, Inclusion, and Strategic Alignment

Beyond communication and values differences, diverse leadership groups face compounding challenges: unconscious bias affecting networking, feedback, and resource allocation (Rock & Grant, 2016); difficulty understanding differing cultural norms around hierarchy and decision authority (Homan et al., 2007); and in-group/out-group dynamics that can marginalize members along demographic lines if inclusion is not actively cultivated (Phillips et al., 2006). Strong, inclusive leadership is repeatedly identified across this literature as the key mitigating factor (Phillips et al., 2006; Homan et al., 2007), positioning leadership practice, rather than cultural composition per se, as the more actionable lever, a framing this study's findings support.

Recent scholarship reinforces this in educational contexts: Hassan et al. (2022) emphasize the necessity of culturally responsive leadership in international higher education, while Liu et al. (2023) demonstrate that inclusive leadership practices significantly mitigate cross-cultural conflict in academic settings. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2024) highlight that strategic decision-making in multicultural academic teams requires adaptive consensus-building frameworks, and Singh and Patel (2023) note that intercultural competence among educational leaders directly correlates with successful strategic implementation.

The applied literature converges on a small set of recommended practices for building cross-cultural consensus: adapting to different communication styles rather than assuming a single default (Hall, 1976); genuinely listening across viewpoints rather than merely permitting them to be voiced (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012); emphasizing shared goals over difference (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991); allowing flexibility in decision-process pacing (Hofstede, 2001); and building relationships and trust through informal as well as formal interaction (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004). Gradual, phased compromise is identified as more effective in cross-cultural settings than demands for rapid agreement (Gelfand, Lim, & Raver, 2004).

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative case-study design informed by an interpretive orientation to gain an in-depth understanding of how senior leaders experience and navigate cross-cultural consensus-building (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018). The exploratory purpose guided the investigation of a phenomenon lacking deep prior research in this specific context, while the interpretive orientation focused the analysis on the subjective meanings leaders attached to their consensus-building experiences.

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The unit sits within a large, internationally accredited business school in Germany and has expanded to multiple campuses across regions, making it an information-rich case. Three senior leaders, given the pseudonyms Julian, David, and Maria, were interviewed. Julian serves as the Dean of Programs with an 8-year tenure; David is the Director of Corporate Relations with a 5-year tenure; and Maria is the Head of Student Experience with a 6-year tenure.

2.3. Sample Adequacy and Sampling Strategy

The three participants constituted the complete core leadership group directly involved in strategic priority-setting within the bounded case. Access to this elite tier was restricted by organizational structure, rendering the three participants the information-rich population of interest rather than a sample drawn from a larger pool. Purposive sampling was used to capture variation across nationality, functional responsibility, gender, and tenure. Variation was present across their functional leadership domains (academic programming, corporate partnerships, and student affairs) and their respective lengths of tenure, providing diverse institutional perspectives despite the small sample size.

2.4. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used, guided by role (top leadership involvement in strategic priorities), geographic diversity, gender diversity, and tenure. While purposive sampling aimed for maximum variation across nationality and gender, the final sample of three participants inherently limits the dimensions of variation achieved. However, variation was also present across their functional leadership domains (academic programming, corporate partnerships, and student affairs) and their respective lengths of tenure in senior leadership roles, providing diverse institutional perspectives despite the small sample size.

2.5. Data Collection

Data were collected during the first half of 2025. Procedures Interview guides and consent forms were emailed to participants in advance to allow time for familiarization with the scope of the research. The protocol comprised nine semi-structured questions covering cultural differences, worldviews, language barriers, representation, resource demands, conflict, priority frameworks, resistance to change, and trust, with an open segment at the close of each interview. Interviews were conducted individually and in-person. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, followed by manual review for accuracy. All interviews were conducted in English, the primary working language of the institution; no translation was required. Each participant was interviewed once, and no follow-up clarification sessions were conducted.

2.6. Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the interview data. The analysis followed a systematic sequence: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) initial line-by-line coding; (3) collation of codes into candidate categories; (4) consolidation of categories into a smaller set of cross-cutting themes; (5) review of themes against the full dataset for coherence and distinctiveness; and (6) final naming and definition of themes.

Coding was primarily inductive, with theoretical concepts used as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined coding categories. This approach ensured that themes emerged from the participants' own accounts rather than being forced into pre-existing cultural frameworks. During theme development, the researcher deliberately searched for divergent or disconfirming accounts (negative cases) that challenged emerging patterns, ensuring themes reflected the full range of participant experiences.

2.7. Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through verbatim transcription and peer debriefing during the thematic analysis phase. Two academic colleagues experienced in qualitative research

independently reviewed the coded transcripts, initial categories, and the final thematic map. Their feedback was incorporated to refine theme definitions and ensure coherence. Dependability and confirmability were established by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail of all raw data, coding decisions, and thematic maps. Reflexivity was addressed by the primary researcher maintaining a reflective journal to monitor potential biases.

2.8. Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee of the affiliated university. Informed consent materials were distributed in advance of interviews, and voluntary participation and the right to withdraw were explicitly communicated. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identity (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure, password-protected cloud drive accessible only to the primary researcher. To mitigate the risk of deductive disclosure given the participants' senior roles, measures were taken to minimize the risk of deductive disclosure by generalizing specific institutional details where possible, and direct identifiers were removed from the analyzed dataset.

3. Result

Result are organized into seven analytically derived themes. Results are reported descriptively; theoretical interpretation and comparison with the literature are reserved for Section 5.

Theme 1: Cultural Diversity as Strategic Asset vs. Individual Adjustment

David and Julian both approached cultural diversity proactively, framing it as something to be put forward rather than merely managed. David linked this to goal clarity as the mechanism that makes diversity workable: clear objectives, in his account, reduce friction that might otherwise arise from differing cultural expectations. Julian went further, treating an internationally representative team composition as a strategic tool for developing broadly appealing strategy, given the unit's stakeholder base spanning many nations: he noted, "So, we really have a global spread here and that's where I think it's important to have also the team have reflecting these different cultures" (Interview 2). Maria's account differed in emphasis rather than in valence. She located the work of managing diversity primarily in her own accumulated experience and adjustment over time, stating she "adjust[s] to the students" with experience (Interview 3). She also introduced a qualification largely absent from David's and Julian's accounts: that cultural influence is intertwined with disciplinary background, making it difficult to cleanly separate "cultural" from "professional" sources of difference, an early signal of the tension that becomes explicit in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Individual Differences vs. National-Cultural Differences

A divergent pattern emerged across the accounts regarding the primary source of friction. Julian reported: "I would say the differences are even higher between individuals than between the different cultures." Similarly, David attributed conflict to work-related rather than cultural sources, and Maria linked stylistic differences to disciplinary rather than purely national backgrounds. Two of three participants explicitly, and a third implicitly, resisted a straightforward national-culture explanation for the frictions they described. This pattern of attributing differences to individual factors rather than national culture was reported consistently across the interviews.

Theme 3: Hierarchical Control vs. Horizontal Aspiration in Priority-Setting

David described the organization as officially horizontal but functionally hierarchical, with profit and institutional mission ultimately outweighing cultural perspective in priority-setting: "I think it's more like the profits and the mission and vision of the institution matters more than cultural perspectives" (Interview 1). Julian's account diverges sharply, characterizing cultural difference in this domain as more often a benefit than a challenge and emphasizing a shared organizational mindset as the unifying factor. Maria's account sits between the two, emphasizing negotiation and compromise without characterizing the underlying structure as strongly hierarchical or strongly horizontal. Read together, the three accounts do not converge on a single description of where authority actually sits, a finding in itself, suggesting the perceived locus of authority may depend as much on individual position and disposition as on any shared organizational reality.

Theme 4: Language and Communication as a Manageable but Persistent Barrier

All three participants acknowledged language-related friction but characterized its severity and their response differently. David minimized language as a barrier in itself while affirming the general importance of cultural sensitivity. Julian offered the most specific account of concrete difficulty, describing proactive institutional responses including hiring criteria and optional language courses. Maria described initial difficulty with unfamiliar accents that eased with exposure, alongside a practical clarification strategy: "you need to ask again if you don't understand, or maybe rather write the e-mail if you are not sure" (Interview 3). The shared pattern across all three is that language barriers were treated as real but ultimately manageable through a combination of proactive and reactive strategies, not as a fundamental obstacle to consensus.

Theme 5: Uneven Representation in Senior Decision-Making

All three participants acknowledged, without prompting toward a particular answer, that equitable cultural representation at senior decision-making levels was structurally difficult to achieve, a fully shared finding. David stated plainly, "I think there is no room for this equitable representation" (Interview 1). David and Julian both pointed toward diversity-conscious hiring as a partial remedy. Maria's compensating strategy was categorically different: she emphasized informal social interaction, sharing personal and cultural context outside formal work settings, as the mechanism through which representation gaps could be softened in practice, if not resolved structurally.

Theme 6: Resistance to Change and Incremental, Communication-Based

Adaptation All three participants described encountering resistance to change from colleagues or stakeholders preferring established ways of working, another fully shared theme. Response strategies converged despite the divergence seen in Themes 1 and 3: David described piloting changes in small increments rather than large-scale mandates; Julian emphasized first understanding the source of resistance before addressing it, alongside maintaining two-way feedback; Maria described preserving some flexibility while maintaining standardized processes elsewhere. None of the three attributed this resistance specifically to national-cultural background, reinforcing Theme 2's caution against over-attributing behaviour to culture by default.

Theme 7: Trust-Building through Relationship and Inclusion Practices

Trust-building practices converged around a shared cluster of behaviours: cultural sensitivity, transparency, encouraging voice, and treating colleagues as individuals rather than representatives of a cultural category, directly echoing Theme 2. David emphasized transparency in process as a safeguard against assimilation, favouring integration of diverse views. Julian emphasized accessibility and actively inviting differing perspectives into decision-making. Maria's account provided the theme's most important qualification: rather than affirming that trust-building efforts had succeeded, she raised an open question about whether all team members actually felt equally heard and understood, a genuine uncertainty that tempers any conclusion that the organization's trust-building practices are fully effective.

Table 1. Summary of Cross-Case Patterns

Theme	Cross-case pattern	Notable divergence / negative case
1. Diversity as strategic asset vs. individual adjustment	Majority proactive (David, Julian); Maria adjustment-oriented	Maria links stylistic differences to disciplinary, not only national, background
2. Individual vs. national-cultural differences	Cross-cutting, raised explicitly by 2 of 3 participants	This theme is itself the negative case for a national-culture reading of the data
3. Hierarchical control vs. horizontal aspiration	Fully divergent across all three participants	No shared account of where authority actually sits
4. Language and communication barriers	Shared concern; divergent severity and response	—
5. Representation in senior decision-making	Fully shared concern; divergent compensating strategy	—
6. Resistance to change	Fully shared; convergent incremental response	None attributed resistance to national culture specifically
Trust-building through relationship and inclusion	Shared practices across participants	Maria questions whether all colleagues feel equally heard

4. Discussion

This discussion is organized around what the seven themes collectively reveal in relation to the study's research question, rather than proceeding interview question by interview question. Taken together, the findings suggest that cross-cultural consensus-building in this international educational unit was shaped less by national-cultural differences alone than by the interaction of individual disposition, organizational structure and incentives, particularly profit- and mission-related pressures, and a set of shared practical challenges involving language, representation, and resistance to change. Importantly, many of these challenges were experienced in broadly similar ways across participants despite their different national backgrounds.

Qualifying, Rather Than Confirming, National-Culture Frameworks

Hofstede's (2001) framework suggests that senior leaders from Germany, Colombia, and Croatia may differ systematically across dimensions such as power distance and individualism–collectivism. A Hofstede-informed interpretation of national scores for these countries would therefore anticipate some divergence in preferences for centralized versus consultative decision-making structures (Hofstede & Minkov, 2017). The interview data, however, present a more complex pattern. Two of the three participants explicitly reported

that individual differences were more salient than national-cultural differences in their experience of the organization (Theme 2), while Theme 3, which most clearly addressed the tension between hierarchy and culture, generated three distinct accounts rather than a pattern that aligned neatly with nationality.

These findings do not suggest that Hofstede's framework is inapplicable. National-level cultural-value frameworks remain a useful a priori lens for understanding potential differences across cultural contexts. However, within this case, their explanatory sufficiency at the level of individual senior leaders appears limited when considered independently of individual and organizational factors. The findings therefore qualify, rather than confirm or reject, national-culture explanations. This represents a modest but defensible contribution for a qualitative case study involving three senior leaders. The pattern is broadly consistent with, and extends, prior observations that variability among individuals may in some organizational settings exceed variability associated with nationality (Pisani et al., 2017). This study situates that observation specifically within the under-examined context of strategic consensus-building in international educational leadership.

Hierarchy, Priorities, and Organizational Structure

David's account of profit- and mission-driven prioritization overriding formally horizontal organizational structures is consistent with, and extends, previous work on the persistence of hierarchical decision authority within ostensibly flat organizations (Hofstede, 2001; Almashhadani & Almashhadani, 2023). However, the divergence across participants is equally important. Julian minimized the significance of cultural friction, whereas Maria emphasized negotiation and adjustment. This variation suggests that strategic disagreement in this case cannot be interpreted solely as a cultural artifact. Rather, it appears to emerge from the interaction between organizational structure, role expectations, strategic priorities, and individual experience. In this sense, the findings again qualify explanations that rely primarily on national culture.

Communication and Representation

All three participants acknowledged that language barriers were present but generally manageable through a combination of proactive hiring, skills development, and direct clarification. This convergence is consistent with previous research on language competence management in multinational organizations (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013). Participants also shared the view that equitable representation is difficult to achieve at senior organizational levels, which aligns with research documenting persistent representation gaps in executive positions even within organizations that explicitly value diversity (Madera, 2013; Bourgeois et al., 2025).

At the same time, participants differed in the strategies they emphasized for addressing these challenges. Some focused on formal recruitment and representation practices, whereas others highlighted informal relationship-building. These findings suggest that formal and informal strategies may function as complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches. Within this case, representation efforts focused solely on numerical inclusion may therefore be insufficient unless accompanied by practices that foster interpersonal access, communication, and inclusion in everyday organizational life.

Resistance to Change and Trust

Participants consistently expressed a preference for incremental, dialogue-based change rather than directive change. This pattern is consistent with organizational-change literature

emphasizing the importance of balancing conviction with adaptability (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Nasr, 2026). Notably, no clear nationality-based divergence was evident in participants' accounts of preferred change approaches. This convergence reinforces Theme 2's caution against automatically attributing differences in organizational behavior to national culture.

A similar pattern emerged in relation to trust. Participants generally described informal relationship development as important for strengthening trust, consistent with previous research linking trust with inclusive and participative decision-making (Stahl et al., 2010; Ahsan, 2023). However, Maria's uncertainty about whether all team members felt equally heard represents an analytically important negative case. Rather than being treated as a minor exception, this account suggests that perceptions of inclusion and trust may vary even within leadership teams that generally describe their relationships positively. It therefore tempers any conclusion that the organization's trust-building practices are uniformly effective.

Theoretical Contribution

This study's theoretical contribution is best understood as a contextualization and qualification of established cross-cultural management explanations within strategic consensus-building in an international educational unit. Specifically, the findings suggest that individual and organizational factors may be at least as salient as national-cultural differences in shaping strategic agreement among senior leaders in this case. The study therefore does not challenge the relevance of national culture itself, but rather questions the explanatory sufficiency of national-level cultural frameworks when they are applied directly to individual leadership behavior without sufficient attention to organizational and personal factors. This is a modest and contextually bounded contribution appropriate to a three-participant qualitative case study, rather than a basis for broad theory development.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for leaders working in internationally diverse educational organizations. First, Theme 2 suggests that individual and organizational factors may be at least as salient as national-cultural differences in shaping strategic disagreement. Leaders should therefore avoid treating cultural difference as the default explanation for disagreement and instead consider it as one possible interpretation alongside individual dispositions, organizational roles, and structural conditions.

Second, Theme 5 indicates that formal representation efforts and informal relationship-building may function as complementary mechanisms for strengthening inclusion. Organizations may therefore benefit from combining structured efforts to improve representation with deliberate opportunities for interpersonal engagement rather than relying on either approach in isolation.

Third, Theme 6 shows convergence among participants in their preference for incremental, dialogue-based approaches to change. In similar organizational settings, the findings suggest that consistently applied participatory change processes may be more useful than assuming that extensive nationality-specific customization is always necessary.

Finally, Theme 4 indicates that language barriers can be addressed through both proactive and reactive strategies, including targeted recruitment, skills development, and direct clarification. Rather than treating these approaches as alternatives, organizations may benefit from using them in combination to support more effective cross-cultural communication.

Limitations

This study is based on interviews with three senior leaders within a single organizational unit and employs a cross-sectional design that captures participants' perspectives at one point in time. The findings are therefore context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to other organizations, sectors, or stakeholder groups, including faculty, staff, or students. Interpretations involving participants from Germany, Colombia, and Croatia should likewise be understood as participant-level observations within this organizational context rather than as claims about national culture more broadly. This caution is particularly important given the study's own finding that individual and organizational factors may, within this case, be more salient than national-cultural differences.

In addition, the study reflects only the perspectives of senior leaders and therefore does not capture how other organizational stakeholders experience the same consensus-building processes. The reliance on self-reported interview data may also have shaped the findings through participants' own interpretations of organizational events and relationships.

Future Research

Future research should examine whether the pattern identified in this study, in which individual and organizational factors appeared more salient than national-cultural differences, is replicated across larger samples and different organizational settings or is specific to senior leaders with substantial international experience. Further studies should also incorporate the perspectives of non-leadership stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, to determine whether their experiences of cross-cultural consensus-building converge with or differ from those reported by senior leaders.

Longitudinal research would also be valuable for exploring whether the relative salience of individual and cultural differences changes over time as cross-cultural leadership teams accumulate shared experience, develop stronger interpersonal familiarity, and adapt to one another's working styles. Such research could help clarify whether the patterns observed in this case reflect relatively stable features of cross-cultural leadership or processes that evolve through sustained organizational interaction.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how senior leaders in an international educational unit experience the challenge of building cross-cultural consensus around strategic priorities. Findings across seven themes show that this challenge is shaped substantially by individual disposition, organizational hierarchy, and economic priorities, factors that, in participants' own accounts, were often as salient as or more salient than national culture itself. This qualifies rather than simply confirms standard national-culture explanations of cross-cultural strategic disagreement, and constitutes the study's principal scholarly contribution.

Practically, the findings point toward three levers for leaders of similarly composed organizations: pairing formal representation efforts with informal relationship-building rather than relying on either alone; applying incremental, dialogue-based change management consistently rather than culturally customizing it; and treating national culture as one hypothesis among several when diagnosing sources of strategic disagreement, rather than the default explanation. These conclusions are bounded by the study's basis in three interviews within one organization at a single point in time, and should be read as context-specific evidence rather than generalizable claims about German, Colombian, or Croatian

leadership. Future research extending this design across organizations, stakeholder groups, and time would help establish how far the central tension identified here, individual difference outweighing cultural difference, holds beyond this case.

Declarations

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The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. All data were fully anonymized prior to analysis.

Declaration of Interests Statement

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